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London clothier decides it's time to get away from FCUK

Years of controversy

Hollie Shaw

Financial Post, with files from wire services

August 17, 2004

French Connection Group PLC is removing the risqué FCUK logo from its new advertising campaign, but denies it is being killed after years of controversy.

"We felt that all the advertising out there was beginning to look similar and decided to do something new," the London-based clothier said yesterday, noting the logo, an acronym for French Connection United Kingdom, will be absent from a campaign set to launch Sept. 20.

The saucy trademark, which debuted in 1997, catapulted French Connection from a struggling retailer into a well-known international brand. Profit soared and the company expanded successfully into North America, all the while drawing the ire of conservative groups.



CREDIT: Scott Barbour, Getty Images

FCUK has had its day on the streets of London -- as well as elsewhere the U.K. clothier advertises. The company is ready to replace its often-controversial ads in early September.

The company worked the acronym into advertising slogans such as "Cool as FCUK" and "Practise safe

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sex, go FCUK yourself," and splashed it on T-shirts and accessories.

Cheeky ads have often landed French Connection in hot water. Last fall, Federated Department Stores, parent of Bloomingdale's and Macys, withdrew the brand's perfume, FCUK Him and FCUK Her, from stores after complaints about advertising aimed at teens with a "Scent to bed" tag line.

Marshall Field's also removed FCUK's in-store displays.

Last month, the Committee of Advertising Practice, a U.K. regulator, told French Connection it must obtain approval for its posters before showing them publicly.

In Canada, where French Connection has eight stores, the brand has caused less of a stir. In 2000, Vancouver public transit drivers complained that displaying the logo on the side of buses was tantamount to workplace harassment. There were no public complaints but the campaign was eventually pulled from the BC Transit fleet.

While the company notes FCUK-branded T-shirts are still its fastest-selling products and insists it remains "absolutely committed to the FCUK brand", industry watchers say leaving the controversial logo out of ads has more to do with French Connection's stale branding than it does with propriety.

French Connection shares fell almost 9% in one day late last month after the British trade magazine Draper's Record quoted a retailer calling FCUK "tired" and tacky. "We struggled with FCUK this summer," a confidential source told the magazine, adding: "Everyone is really fed up of seeing 'FCUK this' and 'FCUK that' in the shop windows. Unless they come up with something new and exciting, we may not continue with it."

Ron Telpner, CEO of Toronto-based advertising agency Brainstorm Group, said sex helped French Connection make a name for itself. "FCUK really got the brand noticed -- it was quirky and fun and new, but I think it has run its course. I think maybe that demographic has grown up a little bit and doesn't want their T-shirt to speak for them."

Ted Matthews, founder of Toronto-based marketing consultancy Brand Coach, said French Connection's challenge is to make the brand live beyond a few years of provocative advertising. "The challenge now is, how do they transfer that equity into something that's sustainable?"

In the new campaign, the logo will be replaced by a series of self-referential phrases such as "Don't make us say it" and "Something beginning with F."

Shares in French Connection have fallen 25% from a high of 502 pence in June, and closed unchanged at 380p yesterday. Despite the recent sluggishness, the share price has more than doubled in the past two years.

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