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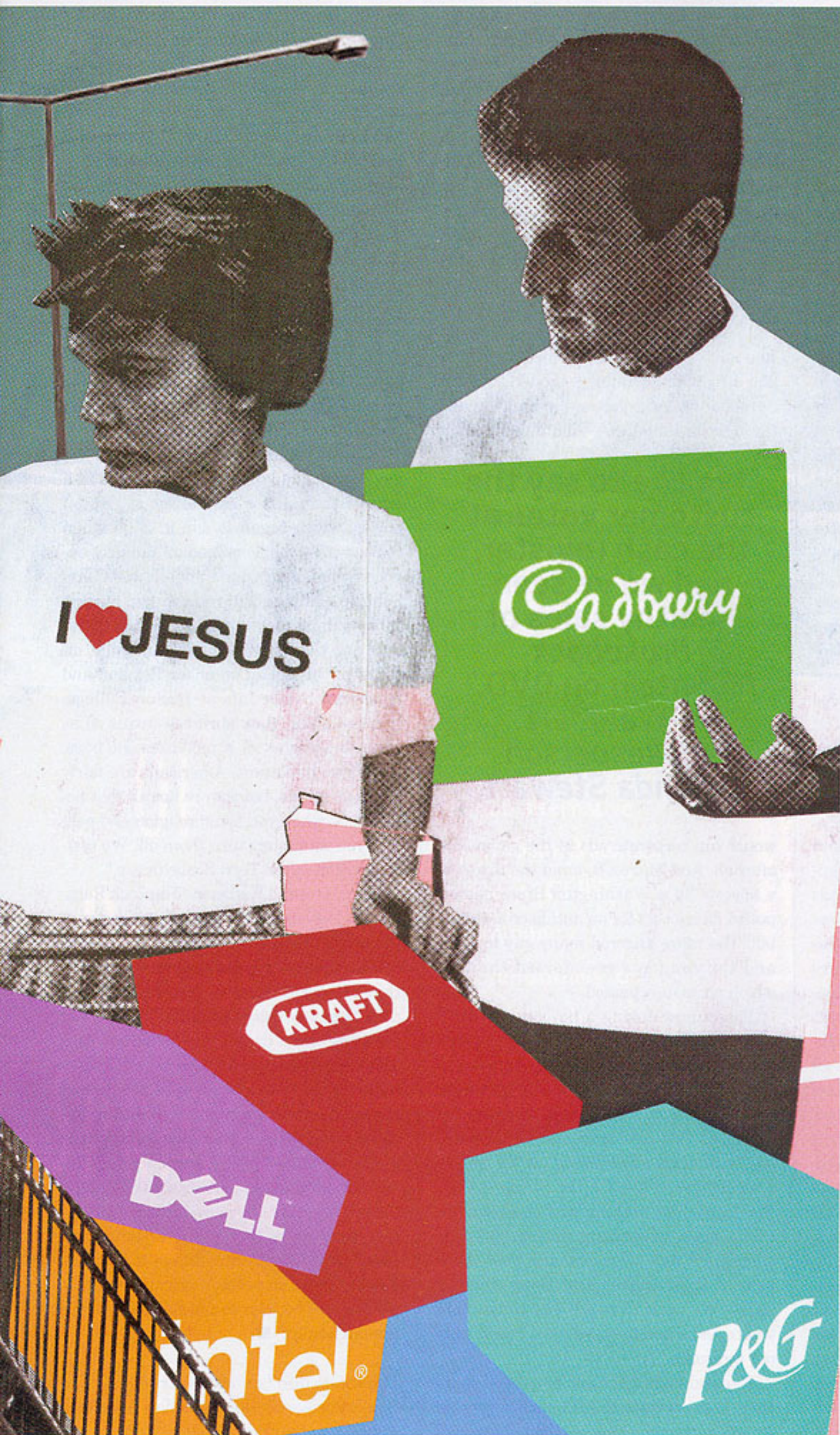


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The breakdown of boycotts

Kraft Foods has said it will continue its support of the Gay Games despite a boycott by the American Family Association. Why haven't far-right groups figured out what seems obvious to everyone else? Boycotts don't work

By Todd Henneman • Illustration by Mario Wagner



Tim Samoff might be the kind of American the religious right is trying to appeal to when it calls for a boycott of a company over its pro-gay policies. The straight resident of Kansas City, Mo., is married and is a devout Christian who attends a nondenominational church every Sunday.

But Samoff pays no heed to boycotts by antigay groups. "The religious right is not a group of people I'd choose to be aligned with," he says. In fact, Samoff has no idea which companies have landed in the crosshairs of the far right.

Maybe that's why a series of antigay boycotts championed by Christian groups like Focus on the Family and the American Family Association have flopped. "While Christian conservatives are a large minority, they are not the majority," says John Green, senior fellow in religion and American politics at the nonpartisan, nonadvocacy Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. "If it just came to raw dollars and cents, they don't have the same kind of influence they have politically." And, he adds, "a lot of religious conservatives actually don't have a problem buying goods and services their leaders disapprove of."

Recent antigay boycotts spearheaded by far-right religious groups against the Walt Disney Co., Procter & Gamble, Ford Motor Co., and Kraft Foods all have failed. The companies not only haven't ditched their pro-gay policies, but their profits have often soared. In the first quarter of 2006, Procter & Gamble's profit was 37% higher than in the first quarter of 2005. Altria Group, which owns well over 80% of Kraft, reported in April that this year's first-quarter net earnings rose 34% over last year. Also in April, 99% of Kraft shareholders voted to reject a proposal that the maker of Oreo cookies and Balance bars nix its sponsorship of the 2006 Gay Games in Chicago, which start July 15. On May 11, 95% of Ford's shareholders rejected a proposal to remove sexual orientation from the automaker's nondiscrimination policy. ▶

"We support the fundamental principle of the Gay Games, which is about inclusion," Kraft spokeswoman Annica Johanson says. "Being inclusive is how we want to operate as a company because we believe that everything we do should reflect the diverse society that we are."

For decades, both pro-gay and antigay activists have used boycotts to advance their goals. Donald Wildmon, now head of the American Family Association, and the Reverend Jerry Falwell's now-defunct Moral Majority in 1981 threatened one of the first antigay boycotts when NBC picked up the sitcom *Love, Sidney*. *Sidney Shorr*, the made-for-TV movie on which the Tony Randall sitcom was based, focused on a gay man sharing his apartment with a single mother. But before the sitcom began airing, and after Wildmon had threatened to create a blacklist of *Love, Sidney* sponsors, NBC removed references to the title character's sexual orientation.

In recent years the AFA has been posting the names of gay-inclusive companies on its Web sites, urging visitors to contact them. And Focus on the Family rates companies in hopes of guiding "well-informed decisions about doing business." The Focus on the Family list includes over half of 2006's Fortune 100 companies, including Dell, IBM, Intel, and Microsoft.

But despite buzz about their growing political access, current right-wing Christian leaders don't seem to wield much clout in today's marketplace. Focus on the Family founder James Dobson can lobby friends like President Bush or sway voters in some regions, but he's had less success influ-

encing consumers and businesses. "The same group that can be enormously influential politically can be completely marginalized in some corporate settings," says John Bruce, associate professor of political science at the University of Mississippi.

Still, not all right-wing efforts to influence companies have failed. The AFA led an e-mail campaign against Dentyne gum this year for including a same-sex kiss

among the endings that viewers could select for an online ad. The company ultimately edited the commercial to remove the women kissing. Cadbury Schweppes, which makes Dentyne, says it received positive and negative feedback about the ad. "However, since this particular Web-film ending became a distraction, we decided to revise it," says Cadbury Schweppes spokeswoman Linda Mayer.

Other companies have appeared to respond to the threat of a boycott but ended up reestablishing their support for gays and lesbians. Last year Ford said it would stop advertising in the gay media, citing a new advertising strategy—though the AFA heralded it as a victory it had earned through its influence—then announced it

**"We like to say the customer votes at the cash register, and we've seen healthy sales of *Brokeback Mountain* on DVD."
—Wal-Mart spokesperson Jolanda Stewart**

would run corporate ads in the gay media after all. And Microsoft, amid the threat of a boycott by a Washington State pastor, pulled its support for an antidiscrimination bill. The move angered many gay leaders, and the company reendorsed the bill, which ultimately passed.

Sometimes during a boycott the truth gets lost, with protesters claiming victory where none exists. The Mississippi-based AFA, for example, said it ended its recent boycott of Procter & Gamble because the maker of Tide detergent and Crest toothpaste stopped advertising on TV shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. But in reality, nothing had changed. "In terms of our advertising strategy, it is the same as it has been over the past three years," P&G spokesman Doug Shelton says. "We seek to reach our consumers where and when they are most receptive to our messages."

Far-right groups have employed more than just boycotts to influence corporate America, though other methods have had

similar results. When the Oscar-winning film *Brokeback Mountain* came out on DVD this spring, the AFA urged consumers to complain to Wal-Mart Stores about selling it. But Wal-Mart was undeterred. "We sell what our customers want: the best and most recent titles," says Wal-Mart spokesperson Jolanda Stewart. "We like to say the customer votes at the cash register, and we've seen healthy sales of that title."

So is there really a far-right Christian consumer base? Broadly speaking, between 20% and 25% of adult Americans could be seen as part of the religious right, according to the Pew Forum's Green. Boycotts by groups like the AFA may be enlisting some people from this core group, but they don't seem to have widespread influence.

Some observers see the failure of anti-gay boycotts and consumer campaigns as a sign of the right wing's tenuous grip on power, which began to slip in 2005 when conservative religious leaders publicly opposed the legal order that allowed Terri Schiavo's husband to remove her feeding tube. "I think they've peaked in their influence and their power," says Alan Wolfe, director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. "For one thing, their shrillness turns off as many moderates as it mobilizes the base. And more important, Americans are fairly religious people, but they're not all that political. So when you blend religion and politics, you ultimately turn them off. We really saw that in the Terri Schiavo case."

The Reverend Katherine Hancock Ragsdale, a lesbian who is executive director of Political Research Associates, a group that tracks right-wing groups, agrees. She adds that religious boycotts also fail because they lack any coherent point. "I have not seen anywhere in the Bible where it says 'Don't sell cars to gays,'" she says. "Do they really think we ought not to be able to buy things because we're gay? Are they opposed to the venues where the corporations are advertising? Is it a speech issue? Instead of not buying periodicals that offend them, they want the periodicals not to survive because of lack of advertising revenue? Or is it really an attempt to put such a heavy hand on people's private lives that we cease to be seen as normal parts of the human family?" ■

Henneman also has written for the San Francisco Chronicle, the Los Angeles Times, and San Francisco magazine.

THE ADVOCATE

Poll

Do you believe organized boycotts can change the pro-gay or antigay policies of large corporations?

Sign on to The Advocate's Web site beginning July 4 to cast your vote and leave your comments. Results will appear in the September 12 issue.

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