

# Reebok marketing push draws criticism for edge

CANTON, Mass. (AP)—The images that sell Reebok sneakers these days are edgy.

One ad depicts the devil. Another has fingerprints on what appears to be a police booking form, as rapper 50 Cent advises buyers to "take advantage of today because tomorrow is not promised."

A controversial television ad last year had 50 Cent, a former drug dealer who has rapped about being shot nine times, counting aloud the bullets that were fired at him. The rapper laughs and then looks into the camera as a voiceover asks, "Who do you plan to massacre next?" The ad was withdrawn in Great Britain.

Reebok's "I am what I am" campaign is a significant shift for the sneaker brand that first gained traction pitching subtly styled, lightweight shoes to American women who embraced the aerobics phenomenon of the 1980s.

These days, however,

there's more money in selling to teenage males — a reality not lost upon Adidas-Salomon AG, which completed a \$3.8 billion buyout of Reebok International Ltd. Jan. 31 and plans to keep the Reebok brand name alive. Reebok's profits rose more than 20 percent in both 2003 and 2004, and were up 37 percent through the first nine months of last year.

Adidas must now decide whether to stick with a marketing campaign that has yielded short-term sales gains among younger consumers. But the campaign is angering activists — although it has spurred no boycotts — and industry analysts say it also risks alienating customers who prize sneaker performance over fashion.

"Promotion and marketing footwear, or any clothing, is not, and must not be a money-making tool referencing gun violence, drugs or gangs," said Liz Bishop-Goldsmith, president of

Rosedale, N.Y.-based Mothers Against Guns.

Reebok, which has also featured rapper Jay-Z, has gone further than market leader Nike Inc. and other rivals in embracing hip-hop culture and youth-oriented entertainment alongside athletics.

As the aerobics craze cooled, the brand expanded into basketball, football and other sports and signed endorsers like edgy basketball star Allen Iverson. Reebok's hip-hop foray began in 2002 with the street-inspired "RbK" line, and in November the company announced it would begin producing Reebok-branded TV programs for a new Comcast Corp. on-demand hip-hop channel.

Reebok's chief marketing officer, Dennis Baldwin, said market research conducted after a late 1990s sales downturn revealed Reebok needed to retrench in response to a changing youth market.

"They weren't distinguishing between athletes and entertainers, and other things that were influencing youth culture," Baldwin said in an interview at Reebok's headquarters in Canton, 20 miles south of Boston. "So when we looked at the market, we said, 'Yeah, Allen Iverson is incredibly influential, but so is Jay-Z.'"

Reebok's "I am what I am" ads celebrate individual empowerment and overcoming adversity, Baldwin said. Alongside the bad-boy ads are some softer spots, including ads with actresses Lucy Liu and Christina Ricci.

Other Reebok endorsers

have less-than-squeaky-clean pasts that might scare away other companies. 50 Cent, whose real name is Curtis Jackson, and Jay-Z have made no secret of their drug-dealing pasts or difficult upbringings. Jay-Z used his real name, Shawn Carter, for a signature line of Reeboks known as "The S. Carter Collection," which preceded 50 Cent's "G-Unit" line.

One of Reebok's newest endorsers is New York Yankees slugger Jason Giambi, who's been mentioned in court records as a client of a lab at the center of baseball's steroid scandal. Iverson, a

10-year Reebok endorser with a current ad featuring an image of the devil, has a record including arrests and convictions.

The Congress of Racial Equality, a civil rights group, says Reebok promotes negative messages about Black men.

"50 Cent was a drug dealer and proud of it," CORE spokesman Niger Innis said. "The fact that corporations are going to reward that kind of behavior is an outrage."

While there are risks in taking on such endorsers, consumers no longer demand (See Reebok, Page 13)

## Hate crime surfaces at Santa Monica High

By Betty Pleasant

Special to Sentinel-Voice

SANTA MONICA, Calif. (NNPA) - The parents of Santa Monica High School's African-American students who endured racial slurs and physical threats in recent days challenged the way administrators are handling the tense situation on campus during an equally tense Parent Teacher Student Association meeting recently at the school.

The PTSA meeting, attended by a large number of concerned parents, came on the heels of what school Principal Ilene Straus described as a hate crime was discovered when the school opened last Friday morning: The words "F— You Niggers" and "Nigger Killers" and signed "18th Street" were spray-painted in large letters across the school's administration building in the campus' central walkway.

The "18th Street" signature was identified as belonging to a Latino gang in the city, and Black students and their parents claim African-Americans have been the target of Latino violence at the predominately White school ever since a Latino-Black race riot broke out at the school last year. "And even going back to 10, 20 years before that," said Carol Zeitlin, the mother of a Black son who she said was attacked on campus by a

Latino student.

Zeitlin said her son was attacked while he was alone, "and now he and all of the Black students must walk the campus in groups — at least in pairs — for their safety. And that's not right."

Crystal, an African-American 10th grader, agreed, adding, "It's not safe here."

Officials said some students went home after seeing the racist graffiti two weeks ago, but others remained throughout what was called a "tension-filled day." One Black student reported receiving threatening messages on his cell phone from a Latino student Friday, and other African-Americans said Latinos tried to bait them into fights.

A group of angry Black parents virtually invaded the PTSA meeting Tuesday night and commandeered the agenda with their complaints about the principal's handling of what they see is a worsening racial situation on the campus and their demands for outside assistance in dealing with the problem.

"The administrators are just painting over the problem, just like they painted over that offensive graffiti," said Lori Williams, a Black woman who was born and raised in Santa Monica and whose son attends the school. "This school is mostly White

and the Whites ignore the problem. They regard it as a thing between the Blacks and the Latinos and does not involve them. As far as they're concerned, everything is wonderful at Santa Monica High," Williams continued. "But they're the ones who run the school and they're the ones who are doing nothing about it. We demand that they act to end this now."

Crystal Quine, a White parent of two Santa Monica High School students, agreed with Williams. "I'm tired of talking about it," Quine said, her voice rising as she addressed Straus, the principal. "This graffiti crosses the line. This is pure hatred, and it has to stop. You have to make it stop."

Straus countered that school officials are trying to stop it. "This graffiti is a very hurtful thing. It has created a lot of tension on campus and is something we will not tolerate," she said. "The school board, the district and the administrators here are very upset about this — which we view as a hate crime — and we're working with police to solve it," Straus added.

She expressed doubt, however, that the writing on the wall had been put there by students actually enrolled in the school.

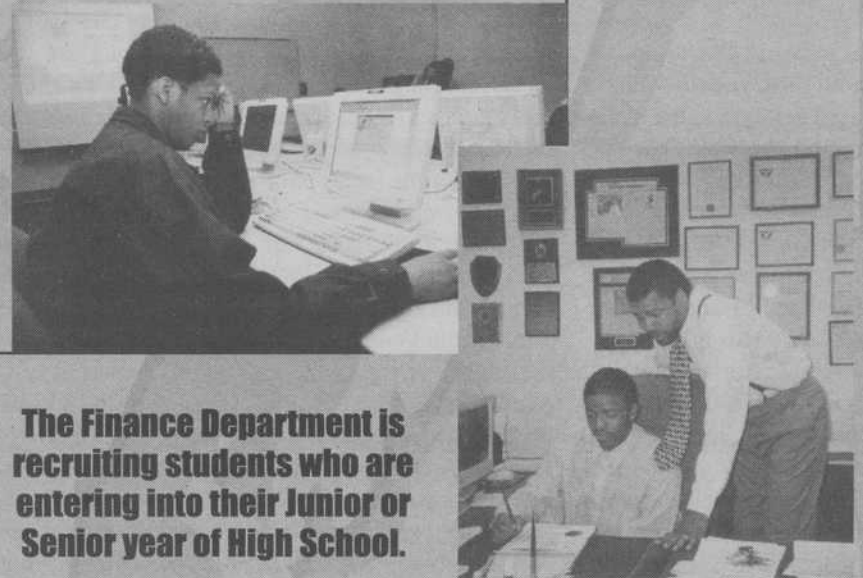
Betty Pleasant writes for WAVE Newspapers.



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