

Protesters Believe Teddy Bear Company is Off its Rocker

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Patsy Kline is one of my dad's favorite singers. In her biggest hit, 'Crazy', she mourns the love that got away. Beyoncé Knowles is one of my favorite singers, and her smash 'Crazy in Love' was the biggest hit of 2003.

Anyone who has ever been in love knows that it can drive you crazy, and this is a theme many songwriters have clinged to over the years. Madonna's 'Crazy For You', Britney Spears' 'You Drive Me Crazy', and Aerosmith's 'Crazy' and describe lovesickness at its very best.

Because the threads of being in love and being crazy are so interwoven in the fabric of popular culture, the Vermont Teddy Bear Co. is attempting to capitalize on this theme by releasing the 'Crazy For You' bear just in time for Valentine's Day. For \$70, you can surprise your valentine with the 15-inch bear that wears a straitjacket and even comes with its own commitment papers that reads "Can't eat, can't sleep, my heart's racing. Diagnosis – crazy for you."

While it may be cute and cuddly, many mental health advocates claim the 'Crazy For You' bear is driving them mad.

Immediately after releasing the teddy, whose slogan is "Trust us. She'll go nuts over this bear!", the Vermont Teddy Bear Co. began receiving letters from protesters from the mental health community complaining that the bear stigmatizes people suffering from mental illness. Many of the protesters demanded that the Vermont Teddy Bear Co. recall the bears, and some of them even threatened to take legal action to remove the bears from the company's shelves.

One of the more high-profile protesters was Jerry Goessel, the executive director of the Vermont chapter of the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. Goessel claims the bear is "a tasteless use of marketing" and that "a straitjacket is not a symbol that we want to associate with sales of a teddy bear for loved ones over Valentines Day." Goessel also stated that "the use of commitment papers, legal documents committing an individual to involuntary treatment, is not something to be taken casually."

The Vermont Teddy Bear Co. was surprised the bear drove so many people nuts because it scored well in market surveys and received overwhelmingly positive feedback from many customers.

In response to the protests, Nicole L'Heuiller, a representative of the Vermont Teddy Bear Co., apologized if anyone found the bear offensive. She explained that the bear was created "to be a light-hearted depiction of love" and "is meant to express the sentiment of how someone might feel about someone else around Valentine's Day." L'Heuiller went on to say, "We in no way are trying to ridicule or make fun of people with mental illnesses."

A teddy bear hasn't been the center of this much controversy since, well, last year, when the Vermont Teddy Bear Co. introduced the Playbear Playmate. The 20-year-old Vermont Teddy Bear Co. is well known for its Bear-Grams and sells more than 450,000 bears a year. Its world-famous bears have made its factory tour one of the most popular tourist attractions in tranquil Vermont, where many frazzled vacationers seek asylum.

The Vermont Teddy Bear Co. did agree to stop the insanity by discontinuing the 'Crazy For You' bear – but not until after February 14.

Fearing similar backlash, General Mills announced this week that it is changing the slogan for its breakfast cereal from, "You'll Go Cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs," to "Cocoa Puffs taste good."

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