

# Christian Products Spoof Commercial Brands and Logos

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By Jay Reeves, Associated Press

**Birmingham, Ala. (AP)** - Christian stores have just the Christmas gift for Facebook fans: A "Jesus Christ wants to be your friend" T-shirt that mimics the design of the popular social networking site.

Do you like shirts from teen retailer Abercrombie & Fitch? How about a Christian copycat that transforms the chain's name to "Abreadcrumb & Fish," a reference to the biblical story of Jesus miraculously feeding the multitudes with bread and a few fish?

American retailers sell about \$4.6 billion worth of Christian products annually, and some are spoofs or spinoffs of commercial logos or brand names. Many such goods are illegal, trademark attorneys say, but companies often are unaware their names are being copied or don't put up a fight for fear of being labeled anti-faith.

There are "iPray" hats to wear while listening to your iPod, and the logo for the popular "Rock Band" video game was tweaked for a Christian necklace with a pendant shaped like a guitar pick. Preachers are even in on the act: They can buy materials for sermons based on popular TV shows including "Lost" and "Survivor."

Imitators include Christian versions of the Subway restaurant logo, the "got milk?" advertising campaign, and the "intel inside" sticker that's on millions of computers.

The "HOPE" poster from Barack Obama's presidential campaign -- which itself was the subject of a copyright fight between an artist and The Associated Press over the use of an Obama photo -- was Christianized, with an image of Jesus replacing the president.

Church marketing consultant Brad Abare has seen tons of such stuff and doesn't like it. He's even come up with a name for some of it: "Jesus Junk."

"We think it's just dumb. It's not a true reflection of creativity," said Abare, of the nonprofit Center for Church Communication in Los Angeles.

Trademark attorney Michael G. Atkins of Seattle said legal parodies of commercial trademarks are protected under the First Amendment, but such religious products generally don't fall into that category.

"You could take Microsoft and change their logo around to make fun of Microsoft, and that would be legal," he said. "But I can't use the Microsoft logo to promote my Christian theme because there's no real connection there. That's illegal."

Marjorie Koval of the Association for Christian Retail said it's hard to say how much of the Christian merchandise market is made up of parody items. The gift and specialty sector, which includes apparel, comprises about one-third of the industry's total sales, she said.

It's also impossible to say how many manufacturers produce such merchandise: Anyone with a screen printing machine and a computer can make a T-shirt design. Atkins said that's one reason companies have such a hard time policing their brands.

But there are a few major players in the Christian merchandise industry.

Based in Berryville, Ark., Kerusso sells Christian-themed items including T-shirts, dolls and jewelry, and it asks customers to report anyone that rips off their designs, many of which are original. Its products are available in more than 7,000 stores nationwide.

Yet some of Kerusso's popular products are copycats of corporate brands and logos known worldwide.

The company makes the Facebook shirt for \$17.99, plus one where Apple's iPod is tweaked into "iPray." For the same price you can buy an "Amazing Grace" shirt that resembles the "American Idol" TV logo. Kerusso's Abercrombie & Fitch copycat is labeled a "classic" on its Web site.

Kerusso CEO Vic Kennett said he occasionally gets complaints from companies whose logos are parodied, and Kerusso generally changes

those designs or discontinues merchandise. Kerusso altered its red "Jesus Christ -- Eternally Refreshing" T-shirt after Coca-Cola complained the design too closely resembled its well-known script logo.

But other designs that might raise lawyers' eyebrows actually are legal. Kerusso licensed the "iPray" design from a Chicago organization that sought and received a trademark for the word, he said.

Kinnett views the commercial spoofs -- which only make up 15 percent or so of Kerusso's merchandise -- as modern-day parables.

"If Jesus were here today would he make parody T-shirts? I doubt it," Kinnett said. "But in his day, he did use parables. He used things that were common and recognized in everyday life to make a point or say something with a deeper meaning."

Perhaps. But Abercrombie & Fitch attorney Reid Wilson said the "Abreadcrumb & Fish" design is a blatant trademark ripoff, and the clothing chain sends cease-and-desist letters anytime such products show up.

"We view that type of use of our trademark as an absolute infringement," he said.

Atkins, the trademark expert, said few companies are willing to make a stink over the issue.

"I think you have a real tension between the legal department and the PR department," he said. "(Large companies) are very sensitive to looking like they are anti-Christian, so they are very restrained in going after the wrongdoers."

Baxter Chism, a United Methodist pastor in Dadeville, Ala., understands the idea of Christians using pop culture references to be relevant, even if he doesn't always think of it that way. He bought a shirt that pictures Jesus dressed as a hockey goalie with the words "Jesus Saves!" because it was funny, not to be hip.

Children are bombarded by advertising from a young age, he said, and many adults can quote from commercials far easier than from the Bible.

"I consider this a window of opportunity to proclaim Christ to people by using a topic they understand," he said. "Jesus spoke to us in stories that were culturally relevant to those listening."

Abare, the church marketing consultant, just wishes Christians would pay more attention to the commandment "Thou shall not steal."

"The whole claim for Christians in general is that God is the source of all creativity," he said. "I think there's something to being original that will speak to people in a way that we don't have to copy."

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