

he was dealing with. I'm sure if he knew the beliefs of Focus on the Family, he wouldn't have accepted the invitation to speak. I will tell you this, what he is doing is way more powerful than making one small mistake. Everybody makes mistakes."

Meanwhile, Nordstrom took a more measured stance. Tara Darrow, a spokesperson for the retailer, said, "We have a great relationship with Toms and will continue our partnership with them as long as our customers ask us for their products. This speaking opportunity was a personal commitment of Blake's that we had no involvement with."

Mycoskie, who turned Toms into a global do-good phenomenon by giving away a pair of shoes for each one sold, said the last few days have been hard for him and that the firestorm is disrupting the company's efforts.

Here, he explains the big blunder, the backlash and moving beyond it.

How have you been handling the last few days, both professionally and personally?

BM: They have been some of the hardest days of my life. I've done more than 70 speaking engagements in the past two years and did not look at this one as any different. Unfortunately, some people assumed that my participation in this event was some sort of endorsement, but it was not. And as a result of that assumption, and a lot of really hurtful blogs and comments from people assuming things that weren't true, I offended people and hurt people who I work with and who I love. It saddened me very deeply.

When did you realize this event was going to become an issue you needed to address?

BM: It was on Friday, July 8, when the first blog post hit. I turned my cell phone on and all of a sudden I had a bunch of texts and emails from people saying, "What's going on?" I guess on some level they responded to seeing such hurtful and

attacked in my life for anything. I took it much more personally than I probably should have.

FN has covered you since the launch in 2005. Do you think that as your company grows and your profile rises, you risk more scrutiny?

BM: Unfortunately, once you are more of a public figure, people will try to use you in a way to push their objectives and try to put words in your mouth that you never said or did, and that was a very unfortunate thing I've had to experience the last couple of days. I started Toms with a really simple desire, and that is to serve those in need. One of the reasons, frankly, this has been so difficult for me, to put it in one sentence, is that the thing I'm most proud of is that our company and our community are extremely diverse. I don't think you can go on the street and see so many different types of people with different religions and different backgrounds and different ethnicities wearing the same shoe. And when you ask them why they're wearing it, they say they get to participate in helping a child's life. And that is the thing I am most proud of and excited about, so to have that celebration of the diversity of Toms and its community and our employees judged in a way that wasn't true, that was so painful.

What's the vetting process for your speaking engagements?

BM: First off, we've learned a lot. We're a young or-

“ [The last few days] have been some of the hardest days of my life. ”
— Blake Mycoskie

mean things being written and assumed about me, based on a speaking engagement. I want to be very clear — it was not an endorsement. Also, many of my friends and many in the diverse group of Toms employees reached out to me immediately, saying, "Blake, don't worry, we don't believe any of this. We know who you are and this is just people trying to lure you into an issues debate. Don't take it personally." It was a very horrible experience. And I guess, if there is any silver lining in it, [it was] to see I was immediately reached out to by many friends and co-workers and people in the industry who saw through it. This is the first time I've been

gamized. Even though we've grown a lot, we still have a lot of young people working directly with me and directly with marketing and communications. There were definitely mistakes made in this process, and we're going to be addressing them. To answer your question about our criteria, the only criteria we've ever used in the past was whether something was an opportunity to spread our Toms story. This is definitely a great lesson learned, but I'm not proud of it. There really hasn't been [thorough vetting] in the past, it's been more opportunistic, [thinking] here is a chance to speak to 2 million radio listeners, let's do it.



Mycoskie speaking at South by Southwest in March 2011

You've said it publicly that this particular event was a mistake. Is there one part that stands out?

BM: I don't think there was one mistake; there was a series of mistakes. I would never want to take Toms or myself into an issues debate. That's not what we're about. We're about helping people. That's not what happened here. Looking forward, if certain members of the public and media are going to say that anytime I speak and tell the Toms story that that is a potential endorsement, then we're going to have to be much more careful.

On your blog, you had been writing back to people. But when someone warned you about this engagement with Focus on the Family, there was no response. What happened?

BM: Let's just say Toms has made some mistakes — big mistakes — internally and externally. Like I said, we recognize that and we're putting in some processes and protocols that weren't in place so it doesn't ever happen again.

What are some of those protocols? How will you vet these potential engagements differently?

BM: Right now, I'm just trying to get through this recent horror. Frankly, I'm going to be consulting some really great experts in this area to help me figure out a plan to make sure this doesn't happen

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