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Blake's Defense

The TOMS founder sounds off on the speech that created a firestorm. BY NEIL WELHEIMER

Blake Mycoskie built a business riding waves of adoration from the public and the press, but the TOMS Shoes founder learned last week the tide can change quickly.

Mycoskie, a regular on the speaking circuit, ignited controversy after headlining an event in Irvine, Calif., for Focus on the Family, a right-wing religious group that has railed against gays. As word spread of the speech, which occurred on June 30 and is slated for radio broadcast, the blogosphere lit up, with angered fans calling for a boycott of TOMS merchandise and demanding the young entrepreneur explain his decision.

"When I accept an invitation for a public speaking engagement, my purpose is to share the TOMS story and our giving mission," Mycoskie told *Footwear News* in an exclusive interview. "In no way do I believe this means I endorse every single aspect of that organization. That may be naïve, and you may disagree, but it is my sincere belief."

Mycoskie, notably humbled and embarrassed by the scandal, said a "series of mistakes" led to the misstep and that going forward the five-year-old company would implement a more-thorough vetting process.

Despite the public outrage, Mycoskie and retailers said business hasn't been hurt.

Tarek Hassan, co-owner of The Tannery, said sales of TOMS Shoes continue to be healthy and growing. "Sales have not been affected at all," he said. "I don't think Blake was aware of who