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Institute Asks Companies, in Their Holiday Advertising, to be Sensitive to Adoption Concerns

NEW YORK, Dec. 20, 2010 – The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, saying its message is “especially pointed during the holiday season,” today called on companies to show sensitivity to all types of diverse families when developing their marketing campaigns.

Today’s statement from the Adoption Institute is being issued in response to complaints from adoptive family members – on websites and to the Institute itself – about two specific advertisements.

One is a television commercial in which a mother is trouncing her family members in a game of Sony PlayStation golf; in an effort to undermine her, they try distractions such as rattling keys and running a blender, and then the grandfather (presumably her father) says, “You’re adopted.” The second is an ad for Johnnie Walker whiskey, running in subway systems in the metro-NY area; in it, a man tells his sibling: “We only shake hands. We call each other once a month max. I still think you’re adopted. And although I’d rather streak across a crowded stadium than tell you this – you’re a great little brother.”

The Adoption Institute reached out to representatives of both companies by email and phone to explain why such references to adoption can be construed as negative, and to ask that they not be used.

A spokeswoman for Diageo, the company that produces Johnnie Walker, responded quickly, explaining the advertisement, which has limited distribution through the end of the month, was not intended to be insulting and apologized for any offense it may have caused. In response to the Institute’s outreach, she said the brand team agreed that unnecessary references to adoption won’t be used in the future. *The Institute is grateful to Diageo for its response, which sets a positive example of how a corporation can act swiftly and responsibly when notified of a potentially problematic issue.*

“We’re not saying anything deliberate was done to cast adoption in a negative light, but some concepts and wording just aren’t well thought through,” said Adam Pertman, the Institute’s Executive Director. “Would the same ads be acceptable if they had referred to someone’s gender, race or another aspect of identity? Was alternate wording considered so as not to risk being taken as offensive?”

Among its programs and projects, the Institute works with corporations to improve their adoption-related benefits and policies, including helping them to promote their products in ways that are sensitive to the broad array of family types in our country today. For much of the past century, adoption was cloaked in secrecy, stigma and shame; that has largely changed, but inadvertently insensitive societal messages (including advertisements) can and often do feel hurtful to children and their families.

“It’s not just about adoption, but about leveling the playing field so that everyone is treated equally and respectfully,” said Pertman. “That message is obviously important year-round, but it’s especially pointed during the holiday season, when we’re all focused more sharply on children and families.”

The Adoption Institute is the pre-eminent research, policy and education organization in its field. Its mission is to provide leadership that improves laws, policies and practices – through sound research, education and advocacy – to better the lives of everyone touched by adoption.

To arrange an interview, write to apertman@adoptioninstitute.org or call 617-763-0134. To learn more about the Adoption Institute, visit its award-winning website, www.adoptioninstitute.org, write to info@adoptioninstitute.org or call 212-925-4089.

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