

PRESSURE FROM BOTH SIDES

Christian conservatives urge boycott

Wal-Mart is taking heat for its subtle support of two gay-rights organizations in its quest for diversity.

By DAVID CRARY
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Long under fire from the left, Wal-Mart is now a target of Christian conservatives urging shoppers to boycott the huge retailer's post-Thanksgiving sales because of its low-key outreach to some gay-rights organizations.

One group, the American Family Association, is asking supporters to stay away from Wal-Mart on Friday and Saturday — two of the busiest shopping days of the year. Another group, Operation Save America, plans prayer-and-preaching rallies outside many Wal-Mart stores on Friday.

"The company has been trying to find a middle road."

Gary Chaison
professor
at Clark
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The corporate actions that triggered the protests were little different from those taken by scores of major companies in recent years — Wal-Mart paid \$25,000 this summer to become a member of the National Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce and donated \$60,000 to Out and Equal, which promotes gay-rights advances in the workplace.

Conservative leaders viewed these actions as a betrayal of Wal-Mart's traditions, which have included efforts to weed out magazines with racy covers and CDs with explicit lyrics.

"This has been Christian families' favorite store — and now

they're giving in, sliding down the slippery slope so many other corporations have gone down," said the Rev. Flip Benham of Operation Save America. "They're all being extorted by the radical homosexual agenda."

Wal-Mart Stores Inc. spokesman David Tovar said the company's outreach to the gay-rights groups was part of a broader effort to best serve its diverse customer base.

"We take pride that we treat every customer, every supplier, every member of our communities fairly and equally," Tovar said Tuesday. "We do not have a position on same-sex marriage. ... What we do have is a strong commitment to diversity. We're against discrimination everywhere."

Justin Nelson, president of the Gay and Lesbian Chamber of Commerce, said conservative activists had misrepresented his business-oriented group as a leading advocate of gay marriage in order to tarnish Wal-Mart.

"Their campaign has not been to educate, but to mislead," he said.

Wal-Mart ranks in the middle among companies rated by the Human Rights Campaign, a major gay-rights group, for workplace policies toward gays. Scores of companies now have a perfect 100 rating, while Wal-Mart's rating has risen from 14 in 2002 to 65 this year as it added sexual orientation to its nondiscrimination code and offered some domestic-partner benefits.

Human Rights Campaign president Joe Solmonese said he spoke with a Wal-Mart executive Tuesday and came away confident the company would continue efforts to promote workplace equality for gays.

Tim Wildmon, the American

Family Association's president, said he and his allies had not ruled out extending the boycott against Wal-Mart, depending on how the company responded to the weekend protests.

"They are so gigantic, it's hard to make a dent," he said. "We're just trying to see if there's some measurable effect this weekend, see if we can get their attention."

Wildmon said Wal-Mart had been responsive to conserva-

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tive pressure on a different issue, approving use of the word "Christmas" in advertising and employee greetings this season after shifting to a "happy holidays" phrasing last year.

That campaign was one of the first times Wal-Mart came under sustained criticism from the right. Far more often, it has been a target of left-of-center groups; such as WakeUpWalMart.com, complaining that the company pays low wages, skimps on employee benefits and outsources too many jobs.

The company has responded by adding low-cost health care plans, launching environmental programs and increasing diversity among employees and suppliers.

Paul Blank, campaign director for WakeUpWalMart.com, sent a letter Tuesday to Wal-Mart CEO Lee Scott urging the company not to cede to the boycott.

"We not only look forward to Wal-Mart remaining steadfast in its support for equal rights, but to the coming day when Wal-Mart will do what is truly right — become a better employer," Blank wrote.

Gary Chaison, an industrial-relations professor at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., said the conflicting pressures on Wal-Mart are "the price of being

