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How should Selfridges repair its community image?

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Exterior of Selfridges' Manchester Exchange store

By SARAH JONES

British department store chain Selfridges is responding to consumer outrage due to what was perceived as anti-homeless studs placed outside its Manchester Exchange store.

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In December, the retailer placed metal studs along the perimeter of its store, which it said was to prevent smoking and littering, which caused a protest about what was considered an “inhumane” gesture toward the homeless. Following an online petition that gathered thousands of signatures, Selfridges removed the studs to resolve the issue, and now may have to battle the residual public perception.

"The public forgets quickly," said Chris Ramey, president of [Affluent Insights](#), Miami, FL. "It's a few self-righteous nonentities who desire to keep it at the forefront.

"Selfridges' clients will quickly tire of the issue," he said. "Community members aren't necessarily clients. Selfridges has a responsibility to protect the latter from the former."

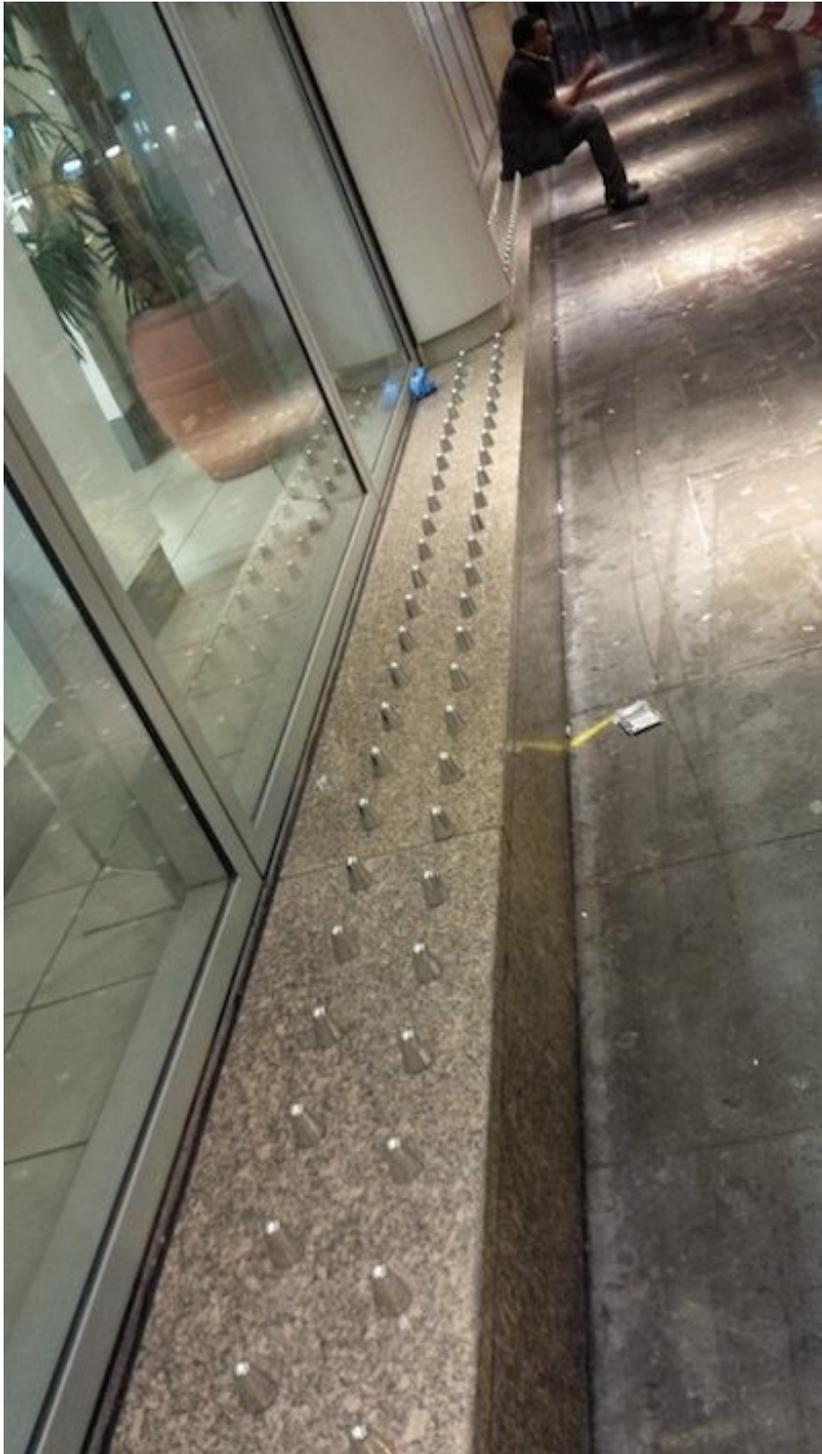
Mr. Ramey is not affiliated with Selfridges, but agreed to comment as an industry expert.

Selfridges was unable to respond directly before press deadline.

Community appeal

Selfridges installed the studs Dec. 1 on the floor-level window ledge where its employees enter the building. In a statement from Feb. 18, the store explained that customers had been complaining of people smoking and litter, and the studs were an effort intended to prevent both activities.

Prior to the statement going out, a consumer saw the studs on her way to work and was appalled. According to her Change.org petition, she shared a photo of them on Facebook, and her friends also reacted negatively.



Studs placed outside Selfridges

The petition includes the lines, “Selfridges have tried to claim that they are not targeting homeless people with these spikes. If this is true, they should remove them and support the

great work done by any number of homeless charities in Manchester.”

In the meantime, Selfridges issued its statement, which argued that keeping away the homeless was never its intent.

The organizers behind the petition met outside the store to raise awareness for the cause, and the [Manchester Evening News](#) reported that clergy members had also joined the effort, planning a march.

There was also coverage in national outlets The Telegraph and The Independent.

After the petition had gathered 10,000 signatures in two weeks, the store did choose to remove the studs.

Selfridges issued a second statement via social media, which said, "As a business we value all feedback and it was certainly never our intention to cause any offence.

Selfridges cares a great deal about its local community – we employ over 1,500 team members in Manchester and as such are involved in a number of local and charitable initiatives.

“We have reached out to those whom have expressed concern on this issue and the store manager at Selfridges Exchange has met with councillor Pat Karney. We have now made the decision to remove the studs and look at alternative designs to address the issue of smoking and littering by the side entrance of the store.”

Consumers commented on the Facebook post containing a link to the statement, saying that they felt it wasn't necessary for Selfridges to act, showing their support for the retailer.



Facebook comments on Selfridges' page

However, the action Selfridges took received a position response from petition creator Cathy Urquhart, who wrote, "We are very grateful to Selfridges for taking prompt action on these spikes, listening to the concerns put forward by the public, and being serious about corporate social responsibility."

Selfridges has mentioned its community involvement in its statements, but it may want to specifically partner with charities that benefit the homeless to reverse the perception of its brand within Manchester and the whole United Kingdom.

"These type of situations should not be taken lightly, and the fact that Selfridges took immediate action says something," said Dalia Strum, professor at the [Fashion Institute of Technology](#) and founder of [Dalia Inc.](#), New York.

"Now is the time for them to put themselves in front of the situation and show advocacy towards the cause," she said. "It's important to not only communicate that there was a misunderstanding in their approach but increase efforts towards improving the homeless situation.

"They should align with an organization towards these improvement efforts."

Community involvement

Other retailers have gotten themselves out of sticky situations with community outreach.

In 2013, Barneys battled a PR nightmare that hit just in time for the holidays.

The department store chain faced a discrimination lawsuit from a consumer who said he was wrongly accused of shoplifting in Barneys' Manhattan flagship store because of his race. After news of the litigation spread, Barneys was on the receiving end of negative social media posts, evidence of wider consumer outrage.

In addition to donating 100 percent of the proceeds from its Jay Z collection to the rapper's Sean Carter Foundation, Barneys formed a council to combat discrimination in the retail industry, headed by Mr. Carter ([see story](#)).

The following season, Barneys used an ad campaign and social initiative to show its appreciation for diversity, aligning itself with the fight for transgender equality.

Barneys' "Brothers, Sisters, Sons and Daughters" campaign features 17 transgender individuals with diverse backgrounds and stories that will be told through a series of short films. With this campaign, met with a widely positive response, Barneys showed a more personal, human side to its brand that allows it to connect on a deeper level with consumers ([see story](#)).

Brands may not be able to anticipate a public relations crisis, but they need to be prepared to respond when one hits.

"This was a guerilla attack that is difficult to protect against," Mr. Ramey said. "You can't predict the creativity of self-righteous nihilists.

"The primary takeaway is to monitor for potential issues," he said. "At the same time, do what is necessary for the pleasure of your clients. Don't be afraid to take a stand that serves your clients.

"At the same time, don't argue in public. It wasn't that important a fight to win. The issue will die quickly."

Final Take

Sarah Jones, editorial assistant on Luxury Daily, New York

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