

During the fall of 1995 in a new advertising campaign to market Dockers brand pants, the Levi Strauss Company hung khakis costing about \$55 under plastic shields in forty Manhattan bus shelters. If the pants were stolen an outline of them would remain, along with a message saying: "Apparently they were very nice pants." New York Mayor Rudolph Guiliani was not amused by the advertisements. He described them as a terrible mistake, and chided the governmental authorities who authorize advertising at bus shelters for allowing placement of the advertisements. Levi Strauss agreed to remove the enticing sample pants in the advertisements, but bristled at the suggestion that it had done anything wrong. "The advertising campaign was designed to introduce Dockers flat-front" pleatless khakis," said Brad Williams, Senior Marketing Specialist for Levi Strauss.

Was the Dockers ad morally unjustifiable? If so, why? If not, why not?

MODERATOR'S ANSWER: The Dockers ad was morally unjustifiable. Placing the pants in a way that tempts a person to steal them could easily create a situation where a young, probably poor, adolescent gets in trouble with the law. Apart from this problem, by making a joke of theft, the ad conveys a counterproductive message to young people that they need not view stealing as a serious matter. Furthermore, for many New Yorkers, seeing the Dockers ad every day, with the pants stolen, would not be funny at all, but instead distressingly symbolic of a decline in the quality of urban life, of which most people hardly need reminders of. The statement of the Levis spokesman that the principal intent of the ad was to market the pants, and not to harm anyone, comes nowhere near morally justifying the ad.

Case from the February 24, 1996 Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl. Copyright Robert Ladenson, Center for the Study of Ethics at the Illinois Institute of Technology, 1996.