



The Barilla Controversy: Family, Pasta, and 'Politics'

Bianca Sorminis (September 26, 2013)



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Apparently homophobic remarks of Guido Barilla, the chairman of the famous Italian pasta company, spurred a controversy that is cultural and political as well as commercial.

In the last few hours one of the symbols of Italy abroad has been targeted by protests and boycotts because of the apparently homophobic remarks of Guido Barilla, the chairman of the famous Italian pasta company, during a radio interview.

Over the years Barilla has become increasingly popular also thanks to its TV commercials, portraying the "traditional" family, mum and dad, two beautiful children, who reunite around the table maybe after a hard day at work or at school, and happily eat together a plate of pasta... usually dished out and served by the mother.

When asked by the interviewer if he would ever include gays in one of its commercials, Guido Barilla replied that it would never happen because their company's view of the family is of a traditional and classic one, and while he respects everybody as long as they don't disturb the others, everybody is free to choose another brand of pasta if they don't agree with their communication style...

"Non possiamo piacere a tutti" he said...

"We can't be liked by everybody"

He added that he respects gay marriages as they involve adults that can decide for themselves, but not gay adoptions because, as a father himself, he is aware of the challenges of raising children and he wonders what sort of challenges would children face when raised in families with same sex parents.

These comments have inevitably caused a national and international uproar and the reasons why they unleashed such a worldwide web storm aren't hard to explain: it's a war that not only sees consumers, politicians and rights associations choosing sides, but also other pasta competitors taking advantage of the apparent slip up to clarify and state where they stand on this issue.

Buitoni, for example, has published on its Facebook page a photo of an open door and a caption that says :

A Casa Buitoni c'è posto per tutti

In the Buitoni home there is room for everybody.

Or Garofalo:



“A noi non importa con chi la fai, l'importante e' che la fai al dente”

“ We don't care who you cook it with, as long as you cook it 'al dente' .“

A formal apology has of course followed the initial statements, and here Mr Barilla seemed to go from bad to worse when he justified himself by saying that all he intended to do was to highlight the central role of the woman in the family, (in his commercials always portrayed taking care of the home and the family...) As predictable this fuelled another series of outraged reactions as seen as sexist and old fashioned...

That Mr Barilla is free to express his personal opinion, is a given.

And he may even venture to assert that these views are behind his company's communication line, providing he is ready to accept the commercial backlash of his words (but is he? Since he felt the need to apologize...)

In my view though, there is another layer beneath the surface of this conversation that is worth exploring, and that is that while many of us are quick to raise eyebrows with indignation in front of this explicit lack of respect towards a portion of our society, the truth is that the lack of diversity and misrepresentation of today's Italian society in commercials is a fact, and Barilla is not the only culprit. Does it take someone to say it out loud for us to realize that what he is stating is what most brands do in their ads, and we are unconsciously accepting it...?

Don't commercials in Italy struggle to keep up with the changing societal composition, whether it is homosexuals we are talking about, or people from a different race, or disabled?

Isn't the woman more often than not portrayed as and dignified by her role of mother and housewife? Or, going to another extreme, the body of women exploited by wrong but obviously effective commercial strategies? Do we see single parents, overweight people or less than beautiful looking characters in our ads?

The commercial strategies aren't always politically correct, but they're not often explained to us and spelled out like in this case... and this, whether a planned strategy (I doubt it) or a case of talking without thinking of the possible repercussions (more the case) was unexpected.

As the receiving end of the commercials, as long as we'll accept being bombarded by unrealistic messages of adulcorated and ideal families and individuals which represent only a small portion of our society, businesses and brands will be able to justify their approach because it works.

Maybe we should think of other ways, apart from boycotting the Barilla pasta, whether we choose to do it or not, to take on this issue as it is much broader and deeper than what it started off as...

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