

# What Does a Model Breastfeeding Twins Have to Do with Working Out?

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FEBRUARY 4, 2016, 3:46 PM EDT



## Equinox Fitness Ads





Photograph by Equinox

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## Plenty, according to Equinox

Have you seen the new Equinox Fitness ads?

To be fair, this a trickier question than you might expect: It's quite possible that you have spotted the images, but failed to connect them with the sweaty, often boring—

 Fortune.com

The campaign, which made quite a splash when it launched this January, is called “Commit to Something.” The ads, shot by well-known fashion photographer Steven Klein, show people committed to all kinds of pursuits: joining a very buff cult, making obscene amounts of money, and collecting sexual partners, to name just a few.

A number of the images play with hot-button topics around gender and sexuality. One shows a muscle-bound male gym rat—whose numerous trophies turn out to be for cheerleading. Then there's the shot of a “cat lady,” which flips the usual spinster script by using what John Parker, co-creative director of the campaign, calls “a hot lady, but ugly cats.” Another one shows a lone woman loudly protesting ... something. Finally, there's a shot of model and heiress Lydia Hearst very publicly breastfeeding a pair of twins.

According to Equinox chief marketing officer Carlos Becil, the ads are a response to a generation that seems uninterested in commitment—be it a relationship or a career,

or, well, a gym. Parker, who works for ad agency Wieden+Kennedy, agrees, placing at least some of the blame on “sharing economy” apps like Uber and Airbnb. “We’re in an age where so many things are temporary,” he says.

To bring home the idea of commitment, the brand tried to home in on issues percolating in the cultural zeitgeist, yet Becil says, “We didn’t want to take a stand on a specific issue or pick a cause.” Instead, the idea was to create images that “challenge convention.”

Of course, in reality it’s impossible to engage with some of these issues without staking out a position. Take the breastfeeding ad—even Parker allows that it could be construed as an endorsement of public nursing.

## ☰ Fortune.com

has nearly 37,000 “likes” and 2,500 or so comments on Equinox’s Facebook page. That’s more engagement than the company has gotten from any other post, says Becil. The comments are mixed, ranging from enthusiastic kudos—“Thank you for beautifully portraying the determination of every nursing momma in such an unapologetic way”—to critiques of the unrealistic nature of the image (Hearst is not actually a nursing mother) to disapproval of such public breastfeeding. “We completely own the work and are unapologetic about it,” says Becil.

What do breastfeeding advocates think of the ad? After getting over her initial confusion of “What does this company do?” Dr. Joan Younger Meek, chair of the U.S. Breastfeeding Committee, says she’s supportive of any advertisement that normalizes—and advocates committing to—breastfeeding. While most people don’t breastfeed two children at once while wearing an evening gown, she says, it’s worth noting that no one in the photo appears to think the model’s behavior is at all unusual. “If an image like this helps get the message across, that’s great,” says Younger Meek.

“We love the fact that Equinox as a client is willing to take risks,” says Parker. “They

have a willingness to go where other brands don't."

## ☰ Fortune.com

That riskiness hasn't always paid off for the brand. Starting in 2010, Equinox did a series of campaigns with controversial photographer Terry Richardson that were **widely criticized** for objectifying women and using waifish, muscle-free models. One billboard-sized ad in Bethesda, Md. prompted a **petition for removal**, calling the photo of a woman crawling on a pool table "hypersexualized" and "degrading."

Becil won't comment on the Richardson ads, saying that the campaigns predate his time at Equinox.

So, the ads are edgy and memorable. But do cat ladies and nursing models sell gym memberships? The ad critics who spoke to *Fortune* are split on the issue.

"I love it," says Michael Solomon, an industry consultant and professor of marketing at St. Joseph's University. "In this eyeball economy, the biggest creative challenge is just getting people's attention, and they've done it." He believes the commitment message will resonate, adding that the imagery takes a relatively "mundane product and ramps up the engagement."

Tim Calkins, a marketing professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, agrees that the campaign is attention grabbing—but isn't so sure it's going to be effective.

“It's one thing to spark a discussion but it's another thing to connect it to your brand and have it to be to your benefit,” says Calkins. “There's not much of a direct link between breastfeeding in public and going to Equinox.”

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