

Perry Ellis Executive Allegedly Demanded "No Blacks In My Ads"

BY [NATHAN TEMPEY](#) IN [NEWS](#) ON OCT 22, 2015 9:34 AM



Oscar Feldenkreis (Getty)

An executive at Perry Ellis is suing over claims that he has been "'frozen' out" by the company's COO Oscar Feldenkreis after complaining about Feldenkreis's alleged racist and homophobic remarks. Joseph T. Cook, president of wholesale for Perry Ellis subsidiary Original Penguin, claims in his federal lawsuit that Feldenkreis directed him and others to make sure there are "no blacks in my ads" or "anyone who looked too gay." Feldenkreis also supposedly told Cook he could avoid jury duty by "telling them you hate niggers and fags."

Feldenkreis's father George has been CEO of the clothing company since 1967, and Oscar is set to succeed him next year. Cook's lawyers claim that the "company suffers from dominant family control at both the management and board levels, which enables Mr. Feldenkreis's discriminatory behavior and conduct and deters employees like Mr. Cook from complaining." They cite as evidence the fact that the human resources department reports to Oscar Feldenkreis's sister, Fanny Hanono.

Cook is an experienced executive and has worked at Perry Ellis since 2012, making \$300,000 in his current job, according to the lawsuit. He takes particular issue with a June, 2015 meeting with Feldenkreis and another executive, where Feldenkreis allegedly made the comment about avoiding jury duty.† "As a gay man, Mr. Cook was deeply disturbed by both the nature of this hateful remark and Mr. Feldenkreis's hostile tone of voice," his lawyers wrote.

The purported racist modeling policy dates back to December, 2013, when Cook claims Feldenkreis was reviewing a joint ad with Lord & Taylor and made the "no black or gay people" directive to Cook and a team member, and directed them further to give him final approval on all Lord & Taylor joint ads going forward. The policy allegedly carried through to

August of this year, when one coworker emailed Cook saying a model chosen by the partner brand was "not 05." When asked by Cook what that was code for, the worker reportedly emailed back an image of black crayons.

"Based on our prior meeting with Oscar though when he brought this up I think the fact that he's not 05 is enough for him to be fine with the ad don't you agree?" Cook says he wrote, adding in a subsequent email, "Crazy that we even have to ever discuss this...sooo not ok."

A cursory review of [Perry Ellis](#) and [Original Penguin](#) ads and runway shows indicates that the company has used African-American models, but not often (we won't hazard a guess as to what "looking gay" means).

Since complaining through a lawyer on September 3rd, Cook says that he has been cut out of decision-making about Original Penguin. According to the lawsuit, Cook's weekly executive reports, usually the subject of immediate discussion with top-ranking executives over email, have been met with silence, and Feldenkreis has taken to assigning Original Penguin work that would normally be Cook's to other people.

This, Cook claims, constitutes illegal employer retaliation, and has impacted his health.

In a statement to the [New York Post](#), Perry Ellis denied the claims.

"Perry Ellis is a company that promotes equal opportunity and a positive working environment. The company is proud of the fact that it is probably one of the most diverse companies in the apparel business following its multi-cultural roots, stemming from Puerto Rico and Cuba," the statement read. "Perry Ellis categorically denies any allegations to the contrary. The claims that have been asserted will be vigorously defended against."

Shareholders in the company [have complained](#) about lavish spending by the Feldenkreis clan, including a lucrative contract to an in-law, \$1 million salaries and large bonuses to George and Oscar, and \$1.5 million spent in 2013 alone to charter a corporate jet owned by the family. Perry Ellis is headquartered in Miami, but Cook works out of a New York office.