Beyond rhetoric

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

It is a stunning - many would say appalling - coincidence that Virginia Tech mass murderer Seung-Hui Cho and Northern Illinois University killer Steven Kazmierczak each bought merchandise from the same Internet gun dealer in the weeks before their crimes.

Cho bought a Walther P22 pistol from www.thegunsource.com and used it in the April 2007 massacre of 32 people in Blacksburg, Va. Kazmierczak bought two empty Glock 9 mm magazines and a Glock holster from www.topglock.com last month, 10 days before he killed five people in DeKalb, Ill. Both men killed themselves at the end of their rampages.

The Web sites are among many owned by TGSCOM, a large gun dealer based in Green Bay, Wis., and controlled by Eric Thompson.

Thompson, who said he was stunned and shaken when he learned that a second mass killer in less than a year had been a customer of his, responded in a manner either creatively thoughtful or brilliantly cynical.

Last week, he launched www.gundebate.com. The purpose, according to a press release from the public relations firm Thompson first used after the Virginia Tech killings, is "to have a dialogue on the best way to prevent future tragedy." The site contains material from the National Rifle Association and the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. It has links to news stories on various aspects of gun control and forums seeking public comment.

Those of the "brilliantly cynical" school will surely point out that www.gundebate.com will get a fair amount of media attention. And, they will note, in addition to a prominent link to the Northern Illinois University victims-support Web site, it has links to www.topglock.com and the www.thegunsource.com. In addition, the bottom half of the release announcing the new site is an ad for various types of handguns, long guns, scopes, knives and more available from Thompson's company.

Those who accept the "creatively thoughtful" notion will no doubt agree with Paul Helmke, president of the Brady Campaign, who said that if the new Web site becomes a forum for a serious discussion of the issues around guns and violence, it can be a good thing.

Certainly, if those who find the site are customers of www.shotgunworks.com or the many other firearms-related Web sites controlled by Thompson, the message of the Brady Campaign and other gun-control proponents will be reaching a wider audience than it otherwise would.

There are reasons to be skeptical of Thompson's stated motivation. But we are not cynical. So, for now, we choose to believe Thompson when he says www.gundebate.com is meant to help find "real solutions, not just rhetoric on a polarizing issue like this." And we applaud Helmke and the Brady Campaign for not joining the cynics' camp and for giving the effort the benefit of the doubt.

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