

PEPSI'S LIVE NOW CAMPAIGN: INSENSITIVE OR A VICTIM OF HYPERSENSITIVITY

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This case illustrates consumer cultural sensitivity to messages and how it has affected the encoding process of the traditional communication model. For decades marketers have utilized the traditional communication model in encoding messages through evolving medium options. This case examines how marketplace consumer sensitivity has changed and that change has altered the way consumers may interpret marketers' messages.

This case is particularly well designed for use in undergraduate courses in Principles of Marketing, Consumer Behavior, Public Relations or Corporate Communications.

INTRODUCTION

In April 2017, supermodel Kendall Jenner appeared in a Pepsi ad in which she seemed to promote harmony between a group of social protestors and armed police by offering the police a Pepsi soda. The ad was part of Pepsi's Live Now campaign. Pepsi stated its goal for the ad campaign was "to make a global ad that reflects people from different walks of life coming together in a spirit of harmony" (Monloss, 2017).

Unexpectedly, the message outraged a significant portion of the African-American community. Pepsi was accused of trivializing civil rights protests. In particular, many consumers perceived the ad as marginalizing the objectives of the social activist movement, Black Lives Matter, which had the expressed objective of raising awareness against police injustice toward black citizens. African-Americans were particularly vocal in their criticism. Their leaders claimed that social activists' objectives were trivialized. Further, they asserted that the message implied that complicated social tensions could be resolved by something as simple as a can of soda.

CHANGING SOCIETAL NORMS

Throughout the years, societal norms regarding the appropriateness of promotional themes and messages have changed dramatically. In some cases, brought on by health research, such as in the case of cigarettes, and in other cases by changes in societal values such as the role of women in society. Listed below are a few of the promotional themes used in the past that could be seen as inappropriate or offensive today.

- 7up. “We have the youngest customers in the business,” picturing a baby drinking 7up.(1950’s)
- Schlitz beer. “Don’t worry darling, you didn’t burn the beer.” Husband pictured with a wife and a burning pan on the stove. (1950’s)
- Camel cigarettes. “More doctors smoke Camels than any other cigarette.” (1940’s)
- US Navy. “I wish I were a man, I’d join the Navy”(1917)
- Soda Pop Board of America. “For a better start in life start COLA earlier.” (1950’s)
- Chase & Sanborn Coffee-“If your husband ever finds out...” picturing a man spanking his wife.(1950’s)
- Lane Bryant. “Free for Chubbies, fall and winter fashion book of full and charming chubby-sized clothes.”(2010)

There is little doubt that many of these advertisements were intended to be humorous. However, in today’s environment, it would be difficult to imagine that the reaction would be positive.

RECENT HIGH PROFILE EXAMPLES OF INADVERTENTLY OFFENSIVE MESSAGING

Marketers have long understood the principles of the traditional communication model: a sender encodes a message such that it can be sent by a medium and then received and decoded by a receiver(s). Recently however, increased consumer sensitivity to politically incorrect messaging has created an enhanced level of noise between the sender and receiver. This enhanced level of noise has created the need for companies to reexamine their messages to avoid adverse consumer reaction. Throughout 2017, several major companies fell victim to extremely negative consumer reactions by releasing messages that offended highly vocal groups. Driven by cultural differences in interpreting messages, marketers found themselves competing within markets where consumer sensitivity was reshaping message decoding – and, by extension, brand perceptions. Consumer reaction to potentially offensive messaging seemed to move to center stage. Messages from several brands, in addition to Pepsi’s, Live Now campaign, set off vehement consumer and/or employee reactions. These interpretations ranged from

unintentionally provocative to blatantly racially biased, as evidenced by the following five examples.

August: Me So Hungry (Restaurant)

In August 2017, a small restaurant and bar business planned to open a breakfast café in West Des Moines, IA. In mid-July, however, the proposed restaurant name and its hip-hop theme came under intense criticism for being offensive not to one ethnic community, but to two. The restaurant owners, who were Caucasian, were accused of attempting to appropriate African American heritage by utilizing the name Me So Hungry (the same name as a 1989 2-Live Crew hip-hop song) and by planning to playing hip-hop music in the restaurant. The name was also seen as offensive to the Asian community for its similarity to a sexually explicit line as stated by an Asian prostitute character from the 1987 movie Full Metal Jacket.

The owners quickly decided to change the name of the restaurant – opening instead as Eggs and Jam after issuing an apology. They explained that they had not realized how the name would be interpreted and that they had not intended to be offensive in any way (Aronsen, 2017). Interestingly, the name had been used by a food truck in California without incident.

October: Dove (Body Wash)

In October 2017, consumers were offended by a Dove body wash ad that had appeared on Facebook. The ad depicted a black woman wearing a top that matched her skin color. As she removed her top, the woman transformed into a white woman wearing a top that matched her skin color. The white woman then removed her top as she transformed into an Asian woman wearing a top that matched her skin color. Consumers took offense to the implications behind the first woman transforming from black to white in promoting a body wash (Shirbon, 2017). Shortly after the controversy began, the Nigerian model who portrayed the black woman in the ad defended the message by saying it celebrated ethnic diversity and was, in no way, racist (Reuters Staff, 2017). However, the damage to the product's image as well as the manufacturer, Unilever, was done.

October: Houston Texans (Professional Football Team)

The NFL's Houston Texans' OWNER, Robert (Bob) McNair, attended an October 2017 owners' meeting to discuss player behavior during the playing of the national anthem prior to the start of an NFL game. During the meeting, McNair used an old figure of speech in saying, "We can't have inmates running the prison" (Wickersham and Van Natta, 2017). This often heard expression that heretofore might have raised few eyebrows created a significant backlash against McNair, the Houston Texans, and the NFL.

Immediately, McNair faced intense pressure not only from fans (or previous fans) of his National Football League (NFL) team, but also from the players within the organization as well. Upon hearing a former NFL player take exception to players being referenced as “inmates,” McNair immediately apologized and explained his comment as a commonly used figure of speech – one that was not intended to be taken literally (Sites, 2017; Wickersham and Van Natta, 2017).

Many fans and players alike, however, remained outraged at his comment, referring to it as insensitive, offensive, and racist. Two of the team’s key players left practice. The rest of the team planned a formal protest during the team’s next game (Axson, 2017) and several players considered boycotting the game (Barshop, 2017). Clearly, sensitivity to expressions or sayings may change over time. Cultural appropriateness not viewed through a contemporary lens may have unexpected consequences.

October: Big-O-Tree Games: Dirty Chinese Restaurant (Video Game)

Another high-profile 2017 example of a brand offending consumers appeared deliberate. In October, Canadian video game company Big-O-Tree (pronounced as “bigotry”) Games decided not to introduce its new video game, Dirty Chinese Restaurant, amidst a wave of criticism prior to its scheduled release. The game allowed the user to take on the role of a Chinese restaurant cook named “Wong Fu” as he manages his restaurant.

The game’s use of negative cultural stereotyping was apparently not intended to be subtle as explained in this quote from NBC News:

“Among the scenarios portrayed in the game are a Chinese cook hunting for cats and dogs in a back alley to serve customers, an immigration officer coming to deport employees, and a tax collector looking for cash hidden under the mattress” (Fuchs, 2017).

Big-O-Tree subsequently apologized to the Chinese community. Additionally, the company claimed that it had not intended the game to inflict “harm or malice against the Chinese culture” (Fuchs, 2017).

DELIBERATE USE OF CONTROVERSIAL OR OFFENSIVE THEMES

While there have been numerous examples of unintended insensitive messages, some companies have chosen to use messages that might be viewed as offensive by a segment of the population to capture the attention of their target market. These companies intentionally used offensive or controversial themes to gain interest in their brands.

Diesel Jeans

Diesel Jeans launched several advertisements that were criticized as being offensive. In one such ad, a young woman and man are shown in bed with the tag line, “You’ll spend more time with your boss; be stupid.” In the environment of highly publicized accusations of sexual misconduct in the work place and the rise of the Me Too movement. The message was seen as a particularly offensive portrayal of professional women. The argument against the message was that it implied a woman need to engage in sexual conduct with her boss in order to advance in her career. Diesel jeans neither apologized nor retracted the message.

Spirit Airlines

Spirit Airlines consistently used double meaning and innuendo to create interest in its airline. Many women considered messages like “check out the oil on our beaches” showing a woman on a beach sunbathing with shiny suntan oil offensive and demeaning to women. The message was aired immediately after an environmentally devastating oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. In addition, its seemingly demeaning nature toward women, the message also made light of a horrific situation that created enormous damage to the ecosystem of the gulf. For Spirit Airlines, this was one of several messages that had generated controversy. The airline continued to use similar double meaning messages in the belief that they benefited the brand. At the time, Spirit Airline's revenues and profits were growing rapidly.

Calvin Klein

Calvin Klein utilized print messaging that portrayed teens in sexually suggestive poses to highlight Calvin Klein clothing. Although portraying teens in a hyper-sexualized context was offensive to many people, the brand continued to be successful with its young target audience.

CONSUMER SENSITIVITY TO BRAND COMMUNICATIONS

Whether inadvertently or deliberately, messaging can enhance or detract from the brand or product. The question for companies is how to balance gaining attention through differentiating their messages while at the same time avoiding brand-damaging backlash.

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