

Why marketers are trying to offend you

adapted from an article by Amelia Tait

- 1 Barely a day goes by without people shouting on social media about something that offends them. Last week, it was Snapchat's anime filter. The lens distorted users' faces into gross, undeniably racist caricatures. It was offensive. It was also introduced a week after Snapchat's biggest rival, Instagram, dominated the headlines with a new feature. "It wasn't our intention to offend anyone," a Snapchat spokesperson said last Wednesday. After a social media backlash to an advertising campaign or ill-considered tweet this is often the first reaction of a brand. It's an easy enough excuse but the trouble is that it's not always true.
- 2 "Marketers use these shocking techniques in order to break through the clutter and be noticed," says Kathleen Mortimer, a professor of marketing and entrepreneurship. "Social media has encouraged companies to produce something controversial which may appeal to the younger audience who may then be happy to share the material online." Numerous brands have used what has now been dubbed outrage marketing to their benefit. Most infamous is Protein World, the little known fitness brand that soared to notoriety after their "Beach Body Ready" adverts. Protesters vandalised the adverts – which were considered sexist body-shaming – and they were promptly scrapped after a social media campaign. But that didn't matter. Thanks to the viral backlash, millions of people worldwide saw the adverts and Protein World made £1m in four days.
- 3 But just because angry retweets are cheaper than buying a billboard in every major city doesn't mean that being offensive doesn't cost a brand. It is clearly 23 strategy. "It is recognised that unethical behaviour can lead to a lack of trust and consequently customers end up not believing anything that companies say in their advertising," says Mortimer. Ryan Holiday, a former marketing director, agrees. "Almost every day I get an inquiry from someone saying, 'I want you to do something crazy'. The reality is that they don't. They want the media attention but they aren't willing to take any risks. In some ways, only the crazy people do."
- 4 Yet the risks aren't as large as they'd first appear. Although people on social media frequently threaten to boycott brands, marketers have long since called their bluff. "Social media amplifies the illusion of outrage,



making it seem more dangerous and risky than it is,” according to Americus Reed, a marketing professor. “If you have a million people expressing outrage, there may be a hundred who do something that has any serious effect. Memory fades.” Countless examples prove this. Although Abercrombie and Fitch’s sales initially plummeted after the CEO said he didn’t want “fat” people wearing their clothes, their sales figures have recently returned to growth. Abercrombie and Fitch and Snapchat are still incredibly popular brands.

- 5 All of this is something social media users need to bear in mind next time they see an offensive advert. It is obviously important to call out sexism, racism, and other prejudice when you see it, but it’s also important to question what your outrage will achieve. Sometimes, it might be better to silently stop buying a product and spread the message by private message or word of mouth rather than unintentionally promote a brand. “What we need to ask ourselves when we read something with outrage in the headline is ‘Who profits?’,” says Holiday.

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