

BRAND MARKETING

Sorry Is the Hardest Word

BUT WHEN A BRAND NEEDS TO APOLOGIZE, HERE'S HOW.
BY DIANA PEARL

Crafting an appropriate apology is something of an art form in the brand marketing world—one that companies like Facebook, Starbucks, Uber and Wells Fargo have tried to perfect over the last year.

An effective brand apology typically comes in two parts: The initial “we’re sorry” statement, and the operational changes that follow. Taking responsibility quickly is all the more important in the age of social media, which has added a layer of complications to sift through while navigating the aftermath of a scandal. Now, customers have a way to directly contact brands when they’re unhappy. And unfortunate moments that might have otherwise gone undetected on a larger scale can spread like wildfire on social media—like Dove’s racially insensitive ad on Facebook, which blew up on Twitter.

“There’s certainly an increased level of transparency that is being demanded because of social media,” said Stacy Bettison, owner of Bettison, a Minneapolis-based public relations firm. “We want to know what is happening. Tell us what you are doing to make it right.”

Jim Sollisch, creative director at Marcus Thomas, believes that social media should make traditional brand apologies a thing of the past, and that apology video spots, like the ones Facebook, Uber and Wells Fargo recently rolled out, feel dated.

“You don’t call in Don Draper when you’ve been caught selling people’s privacy or creating false accounts to milk your customers,” he said while comparing a mass market TV spot to ending a relationship via text. “Not the right vehicle, no matter how well-crafted your message.”

Instead, Sollisch recommends a simpler

DO'S AND DON'TS



WELLS FARGO The bank’s apology tour for opening millions of faux accounts most recently featured its “Earning Your Trust” campaign. “There was this opportunity and need to acknowledge that we had lost our way, but to give really concrete examples,” CMO Jamie Moldafsky said. “You can only do that once you’ve made fundamental changes in response to a crisis.” However, this campaign wasn’t a win for everyone. “I cringe every time I hear Wells Fargo’s polished, upbeat voiceover talent tell me that they’re committed to regaining my trust,” Sollisch said.



KFC Across the pond, KFC was faced with a PR crisis when a chicken shortage arose, forcing several of their stores to close. KFC U.K. and Ireland’s marketing team and their agency, Mother London, looked to their own name to find the perfect apology tactic: A rearrangement of letters KFC to FCK on the iconic chicken buckets, followed by an apology for the shortage. The campaign ended up winning gold Lions in PR and Print at Cannes.



FACEBOOK The social network’s “Here Together” campaign was meant as a way to get back to Facebook’s roots following its fake news issues, and wasn’t a response to the Cambridge Analytica scandal. But the timing made it feel like another one of CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s effusive apologies, which Weidlich said are hurting his cause. “He’s apologized so many times it’s sort of become a joke,” he said.

approach: Put a CEO in front of the camera to talk to customers.

“Social media allows for rawer, less polished communication,” Sollisch said, suggesting brands let victims interact with them during a Facebook Live session. “Social media is a two-way street. A TV ad, not so much.”

Bettison agreed: “The bare-bones style is almost more genuine. You’re not trying to get me with music that will make me feel inspired. It can do a lot of right, when there’s been wrong.”

Hiding from the truth is one of the worst routes a brand can take, said Bettison. With that often comes the issuing of a “non-apology”—a statement that isn’t actually an apology, but rather deflects blame, perhaps saying that they’re sorry customers are upset, not that they’re sorry for what happened. “Those really make people angry, especially customers, because it doesn’t take responsibility,” Bettison said.

One recent non-apology came from United Airlines in April 2017, when footage of a passenger being injured as he was forcibly removed from a flight went viral. It took two statements and an internal memo from CEO Oscar Munoz before the company apologized to the man. He admitted “full responsibility,” adding, “It’s never too late to do the right thing,” but the damage was done and United was roasted on late-night shows and online.

“If companies do issue something that’s not quite right, then they need to go back and say we’re doing this again,” Bettison said.

But apologies are hollow if brands don’t follow through on it. “Until you change your behavior, [saying you’re sorry] doesn’t really matter,” Bettison said. “It feels good, but if there’s no fix, then the apology is just words.”

In stark contrast to United, Starbucks took immediate action after two men were wrongfully arrested at a Philadelphia store. CEO Kevin Johnson issued an apology within hours, and even flew to Pennsylvania after the arrests. “A lot of CEOs wouldn’t have done that,” Thom Weidlich, content manager at CrisisResponsePro, said. “That showed real commitment.” Starbucks followed up Johnson’s visit by closing every store for racial sensitivity training—a move Weidlich said “made an impression.”

The key to a truly effective apology, Bettison said, is simply to be truthful. Making mistakes and saying sorry are experiences that everyone is familiar with, even if they don’t run a business.

“People struggle with these same things in their personal lives,” she said. “The cleaner you are, and the more authentic and honest you are, that resonates with people.”

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