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Social firestorm: How shall brands manage it well?

July 23, 2020, 9:50 AM IST Dr Muneer in The Medici Way | India | TOI



The outrage and call for boycott by a section of Twitterati against the HUL tea brand Red Label follows a similar social fury against their Surf Excel brand a year earlier. Both the times, the issue was around ads that featured people of two different faiths but in a positive way.

Despite both ads scoring high on emotional connect, storyline, memorability and social relevance, a firestorm got erupted in social media. Was that a brand weapon to get wider reach or a fury instigated by competitors for boycott? (Funnily, the Surf Excel boycott didn't affect it but a totally different brand, Microsoft Excel!)

Red Label is one of the top-selling tea brands in India and its ad, centred around Ganesha festival, has left some people fuming in social media, perhaps justifying the essence of the ad itself. The ad is about a Hindu shopping for a Ganesha idol but he hesitates to buy the one he liked when he realises that a Muslim has made it. Angry tweets said it was an insult on the majority Hindus and that no Hindu would display such hesitation. Many commented that brands should stay away from religion in a polarised society.

The question should not be about brands using religion as a theme but about how brands should manage social fury – or firestorms – to their benefit. Firestorms are often seen as negative (Uber and United Airlines suffered when their crises went viral), but they can be good brand weapons. There have been incidents of bomb threats and large petitioning online, but at the same time brand followers have been found to increase by the 1000s.

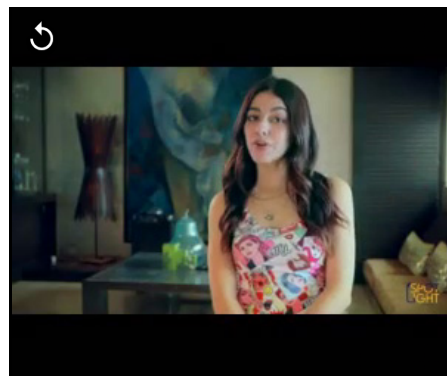
Brands can get entangled in social fury not just because of religion. Chobani, the leading Greek yogurt brand in the USA, promotes its natural ingredients with the tagline, "How Matters." Their campaign with messages under the lids of their low-calorie "Simply 100" yogurt turned sour with the scientist community because of the message "Nature got us to 100 calories, not scientists". The brand had to apologise online, and ended up offering free yogurts to scientists to cool the online heat.

Businesses of all sizes – from kirana stores to Fortune 100 – have tasted social fury. Brands do not need millions of followers to counter the negative reports, but they need to understand how the social outrage works and how it can become uncontrollable in order to turn it to their advantage.

In a major research in California, 14000 English words were ranked on an emotional scale, and reactions to three different social media crises were studied. Researchers separated over 9500 tweets by behavioural intention, emotional intensity and number of characters. Some surprising insights came about: About 81% of those who vent their anger against brands have no direct issue with the brands concerned and they are only retweeting. The

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Dr Muneer

Muneer is a global expert columnist, writing on topical issues looked through management frameworks. He wears multiple hats including that of a social evangelist as the co-founder of the non-profit Medici Institute that was mentored by the late Dr Kalam, management consultant and startup entrepreneur. His expertise is in strategy execution having worked with global brands across borders. Current passion is in driving governments to execute what they promise. He is the managing director of CustomerLab Solutions, an innovative consulting firm in partnership with leading minds of the world and also that of a US-based deep-tech startup. He pioneered the setting up of thought leadership seminar industry in India in the late 1990s and had been instrumental in delivering cutting-edge knowledge to the C-suite, in partnership with Times Group.

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other 19% are the ones who are the real activists and they take the time to write the original messages with low emotional intensity but with the clear intention to harming a brand and seeking compensation. They appear to be less angry since they do not use four-letter words or wish the brand to die but they are the ones brands should pay total attention to. Those who appear angry and abusive retweet once and get off but this rational group is persistent and is a cause for concern.

The ones who appear angry seem to add just one or two words such as WTF or angry emoji while retweeting another angry post. Marketers should pay attention to those calmer online posters who call for action. They will not go away and most often brand heads overlook these posts because it is low on emotion and not inflammatory.

Sometimes the outrage can be good for brands. While they should respond to, and apologize for, mistakes (Chobani), harmful products (Nestle Maggi Noodles) and mistreatment of customers (United Airlines), they can use some firestorms as brand weapons to strengthen the brand's position and relationship with customers.

One brand that took a bold and unapologetic stance against a fury was Protein World in the UK that got the flak for its campaign "Are you beach-body ready?" The criticism was for fat-shaming and driving unrealistic body standards for consumers. The brand disagreed by saying it was empowering people to be healthy. And it went ahead and tweeted that "we are a nation of sympathisers for fatties" and called its critics "lazy and weak!" The controversy fit Protein World's brand voice it has been maintaining. Most brands are not prepared for the social fury when it happens to them. Although the jury is still out there as to what best works in general to contain social outrage, here are a few pointers based on various research that are still underway:

- When a social fury breaks out, don't react immediately to the majority of angry tweets. Research has it that the majority are only retweeting and venting their anger at something and not necessarily at the brand. They are also unlikely to retweet again. By reacting you might aggravate the situation and alienate the rational and serious minority. The angry-appearing ones will be delighted with an apology and they just want to impress their followers.
- Analyse keywords such as boycott, ban, greed and unethical along with your brand name. The serious activists are characterised by such rational words and will persist. Not every such comment will lead to mass fury but when signature campaign begins that is a sign to start responding to the critics. The petitioning means the serious minority want amends and they are unlikely to let it go without a remedy.
- Stay balanced and avoid being nasty. If you desire to turn the fury to your advantage, find a balance between staying on your brand voice and alienating the vociferous critics. A good example to follow is that of Wendy's that regularly makes fun of their followers and competitors. A McDonald's tweet with errors got this retort: "...as broken as the ice cream machine". Decide on the real issue of critics and if it is genuine, acknowledge it and apologise. Then examine how you can benefit from the controversy. If it doesn't fit with the brand, just move on.
- Be willing to change your tactics. Protein World CEO initially questioned the mental health of critics, which was subsequently deleted. No one knows the perfect thing to

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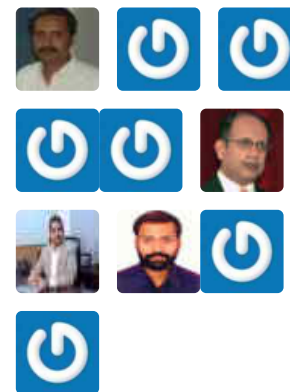
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Do we quantify the negativity (to brand image and sales) due to the social fury in cases like red label ? Are these actions really significant espec...



Sethu PL

Interesting thoughts. Hope brands don't start a firestorm to build the brands!

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