

The business end of social media outrage

Brand heads should read the outrage well. While some require an apologetic stance, others can be used to their benefit

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The outrage expressed by a section of Twitterati over HUL's tea brand Red Label follows a similar social fury against its Surf Excel brand earlier this year. Both the times, the issue was around ads that featured people of two different faiths.

Despite both ads scoring high on emotional connect, storyline, memorability and social relevance, a firestorm got erupted in social media.

Red Label is one of the top-selling tea brands in India and its ad, centred around Ganesh 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 Ganesh 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 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-scale petitioning online, but at the same time the brand followers have increased by the 1000s.

Brands can get entangled in social fury not just because of religion. Chobani, the leading Greek yogurt brand in the US, promotes its natural ingredients with the tagline, "How Matters." The campaign of its low-calorie 'Simply 100' yogurt didn't go well with the scientist community be-

cause of the message under the lid: "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 be turned to their advantage.

Research findings

In a major research in California, 14,000 English words were ranked on an emotional scale, and reactions to three different social media crises were studied. Researchers separated over 9,500 tweets by behavioural intention, emotional intensity and number of characters. Some surprising insights emerged: About 81 per cent of those who vent their anger against brands have no direct issue with the brands concerned and they are only re-tweeting. The other 19 per cent 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 harm a brand and seek 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 re-tweet 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 swear words or angry emojis while re-tweeting. 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 apologise 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.

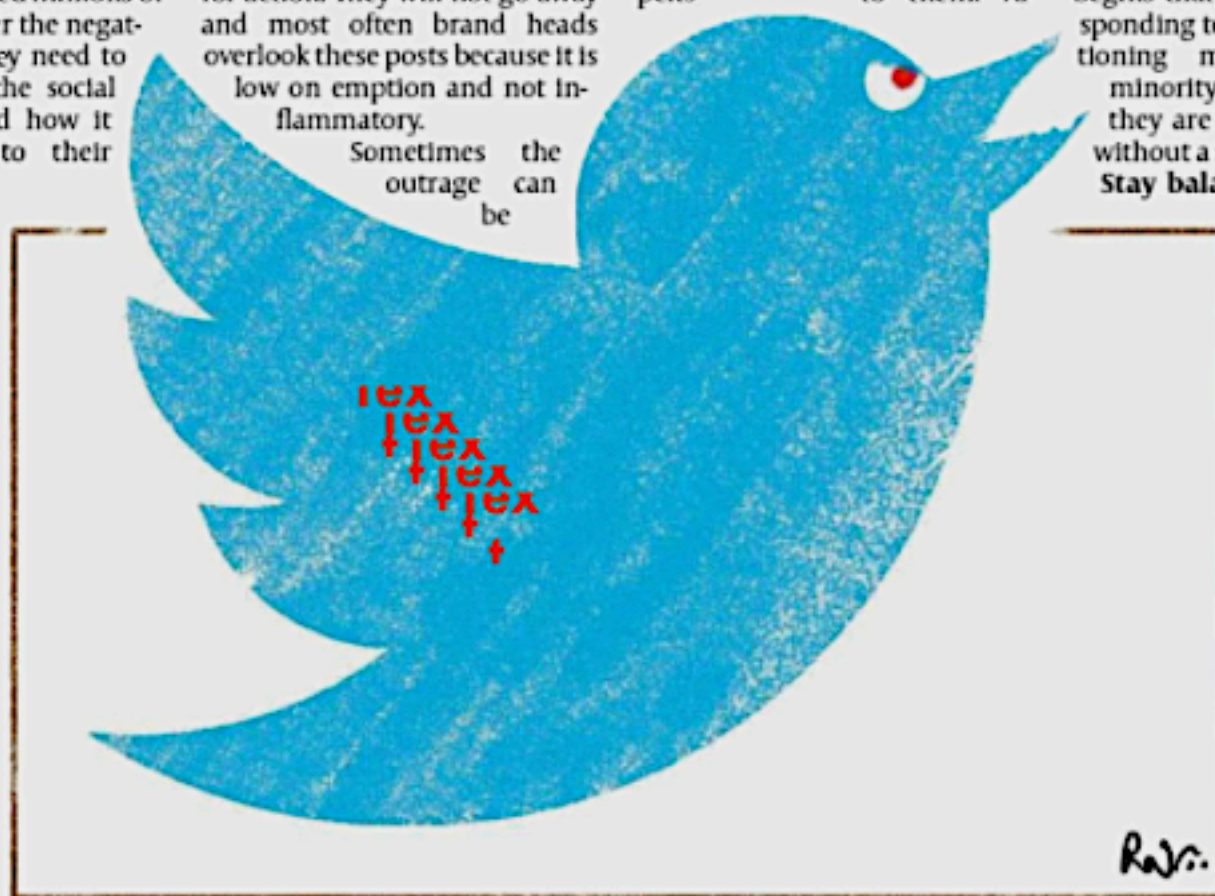
One brand that took a bold and unapologetic stance against a fury was Protein World in the UK that got the flak for its campaign "Are you beach-body ready?"

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. Al-



though 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 under way:

When a social fury breaks out, don't react immediately to the majority of angry tweets. Research has it that the majority are only re-tweeting and venting their anger at something and not necessarily at the brand.

They are also unlikely to re-tweet 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 a 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 its 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 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 do in an ever-evolving social media. Issue a media release? Tweet to make things worse? Apologise? Do nothing? So keep reassessing your responses.

The writer is Co-Founder and Chief Evangelist at Medici Institute, a non-profit company that drives innovation and social change

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