

'Polarising approaches'

Brands that try to please everyone make an enemy of themselves, says **Martin Reid**

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Before the age of social media and incendiary clickbait headlines, public shaming was handled by the law and settled with shackles and rotten fruit. Nowadays, anyone can single-handedly dismantle the reputation of their fellow man or multinational retailer with one well-timed tweet. But, thanks to the culture of bilateral reviews, where staff and companies can answer back and say what they really think of their disrespectful regulars and messy hotel guests, the power that customers have over influencing a brand's reputation is slowly waning.

"We're creating a culture where people feel constantly surveilled, where people are afraid to be themselves," says Jon Ronson in his book, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*. "As soon as the victim steps out of the pact by refusing to feel ashamed ... the whole thing crumbles."

Some brands are starting to follow this lead and are refusing to bend over backwards to appease every demanding customer for fear of a public blowout. Beyond witty retorts on social media, some brands are standing their ground and are prioritising

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their own interests to the chagrin of defected complainers. In the same way that customers get to choose where their loyalties lie, brands are following suit and are being more selective in how they treat their customers, nurturing their favourites and sparing no time on dubious prospects and detractors. This polarising approach is redefining the treatment that customers expect and challenges what it means to be a brand staying true to its values.

Divide and conquer

KFC's mischievous Instagram campaign (covered in GIR 56) is testament to how a brand turning against a group that doesn't share its values can reinforce engagement from its own target demographic. KFC started a social media war against the #richkidsinstagram trend by encouraging its own thrifty young customers to make fun of these rich kids' decadent photos. The campaign went viral, earning KFC Romania a 21% sales increase and credit as the brand's most successful campaign since 2009.

Marginalising a few undesirables to inspire advocacy from a brand's long-term customers seems to be worth the risk. After all, Forrester's research indicates it costs five times more money to acquire a customer than to maintain a relationship with one.

A brand has to accept that not every customer can be included in its vision if it wants to stay true to its values. Rather than putting off customers, a brand proving its ethos can bolster a customer's sense of belonging. Take adidas' #allin campaign last year, that would delete fans from its CRM system if they wouldn't commit to following all of the brand's social channels. Adidas gained 5.8 million followers, as inspired fans demonstrated their allegiance.

As brands are reclaiming their authority, they can afford to decide who can be their customers and who can't. Stefan's Head lets certain customers shop with them only if they are "cool" enough, with the criteria decided by the brand itself. While there is equal opportunity for customers to try and get in with the brand, there is not always an equal result.

Likewise, Ralph Lauren risks upsetting customers with its Milan concept store. Previously open to anyone, the branch now only caters to VIP customers. Too bad for the casual shopper but great for the elite customers the brand wants to cultivate.

These tactics of confrontation and aspiration may alienate the few but it motivates more customers to believe in the brand. As they forge tighter relationships with their customers, brands are justifying being brazen in how they treat others.



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Pick Your Battles

Professor Xueming Luo of Temple University believes in a "brand dispersion" scale that illustrates how passionately customers love or hate a particular brand. He offers three strategies for approaching polarisation amongst customers: placating haters, provoking haters and amplifying what makes a brand so polarising in people's minds. "Managers need to realise that having a group of consumers who hate your brand can be a good thing," he tells the *Harvard Business Review*.

Arguably this year's most divisive campaign was Protein World's "Are you beach body ready" posters, which ignited an uproar about media attitudes to body image. Inciting protests, petitions and poster defacements, the brand never backed down or apologised for its message, even aggressively fighting back against its haters on social media.

"What Protein World has done is become one of the first high-profile brands ever to show genuine integrity, and it is reaping the rewards," Alex Smith,

planning director at creative agency Sense, told *Marketing Magazine*.

As controversial and vilified as the campaign was, its notoriety was technically a marketing success, generating a fourfold revenue from its quarter million pound advertising spend, enabling the same campaign to incense commuters in New York.

But no sane brand wants to be majorly despised. Polarising customers therefore comes with a caveat. Brands should also know when to back down. After all, Abercrombie & Fitch recently relinquished one of its familiar brand identifiers, its employment of exclusively shirtless Adonis-like staff, after receiving constant criticism and recognising attitudinal shifts.

It's up to brands to weigh up the risks of standing by their values to foster loyalty against the reception of the status quo. The challenge is knowing when to ease off the accelerator in, as Jon Ronson laments, "a world where the smartest way to survive is to be bland." **GDR**

1 Stefan's Head screens its customers before agreeing to sell them its apparel

2 KFC vilified rich kids to delight its core customers

3 Adidas deleted fans from its CRM if they refused to follow all of the brands channels

4 Protein World's controversial advert produced a successful campaign because the brand refused to back down

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