

Brands, the consumer and cancel culture

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Marketing has evolved over the years and so has the consumer. As marketers, we are no longer dealing with passive consumers. There's a new breed of "woke" consumers and they are holding brands accountable for various issues like never before. In the past, it was difficult for consumers to reach corporations, but social media has made it easy for the people on the ground to voice their opinions pertaining to issues surrounding brands. This is both a blessing and a curse. A blessing in that it can force change within organisations and a curse because it can be problematic when accusations are unmerited, and individuals, brands or organisations get "cancelled".

The [Urban Dictionary](#) describes Cancel Culture as *"a modern internet phenomenon where a person is ejected from influence or fame by questionable actions. It is caused by a [critical mass](#) of people who are quick to judge and slow to question. It is commonly caused by an [accusation](#), whether that accusation has merit or not. It is a direct result of the ignorance of people caused communication technologies outpacing the growth in available knowledge of a person."*

Cancel culture is gaining momentum, spurred on by Covid-19. The pandemic dramatically increased the amount of time that people spend online. Being deprived of in-person social interactions during imposed lockdowns globally, only exaggerated the divisions that social media already feeds off. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter, among others, have given the consumer power to share their opinions without fear or favour, but people can also lose their sense of individualism and end up "following the cancel crowd".

In recent times, we have seen some global and local brands being subjected to cancel culture. Brands have been on the receiving end of "cancellation" threats due to "controversial" campaigns, and at times by association with a particular brand ambassador, influencer, or platform. Herein lies the issue. When a brand buys into a celebrity or influencer brand, they are buying into that brand's persona/socially constructed reality. The assumption is that such individuals are thoroughly vetted and approved by the marketing team as representatives or ambassadors of the brand, meaning that the two brands' values are aligned. There are contractual agreements in place to protect both parties, but even with all these measures in place, things can go wrong.

When things do go wrong, brands tend to "react" instead of "respond" to the situation – the former is impulsive, defensive, and emotional, while the latter is thoughtful and requires emotional intelligence. The problem with reactionary strategies is that they are dismissive and defensive in nature and can lead to consumer backlash. As mentioned earlier, brands need to understand that they are now speaking to savvy and well-informed consumers who hold them to a high standard. At times, these standards can be quite contradictory and can also impose unrealistic expectations on brands. This reality requires nuanced responses.

Brands need to create multi-dimensional strategies that deal with various forms of responses from a PR and communication perspective; scenarios and responses that deal with an array of social and cultural issues that may arise from a particular campaign or sponsorship that they choose to align themselves with. They need to stress-test partnerships before fully engaging in them because avoiding the initial flame is easier than putting out a fire. A lot of partnerships are being driven by popularity: who is trending, who will drive reach. When partnerships backfire, for the most part, consumers don't care about your brand; they ultimately evaluate the brand on its alignment with their personal values.

Our consumers know more about what we do than ever before. Brands no longer have the luxury of creating the show behind the curtains. If you are a brand that is topical and quick to jump on every trending issue, you cannot take hours or days to respond to a brand crisis. Consumers can tell when you are taking too long to formulate a response and may make assumptions about the politics behind it.

Fortunately for brands, consumers often have limited “cancelling staying power”. They tend to forget and move on very quickly, but the danger is that each negative engagement is a mark on an invisible scoreboard – they don’t forget the tally.

Brands need to come up with responses that are authentic, speak directly to the issues at play and are purposeful. Consumers love to see impactful progress, and they love to feel as if they are being heard in a meaningful, respectful way. These strategies should include thought-provoking responses that not only spark debate among people, but also challenge consumers’ values, prejudices, and opinions, while simultaneously earning their trust. These conversations can also help identify useful insights within target markets, which in turn can help build even stronger, more relevant brands.

Needless to say, getting this balance right is easier said than done. But those brands that take the time and energy to deeply think through these issues, and strengthen their ability to respond effectively, will inevitably come out ahead.

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