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SOCIAL MEDIA: LIFE OR DEATH FOR ADVERTISERS

by Karen L. Mallia

Two advertising campaigns died untimely deaths in late 2008. They fell to consumers wielding a powerful new weapon: social media.

Much has been discussed in the advertising world about the brilliant promise of social media to reach and engage consumers in ways more meaningful than a traditional ad ever could. But the dark side of social media showed itself twice last fall: first when Twitter users attacked the J&J Motrin moms campaign, and again when bloggers bombed the Pepsi Max campaign launched in Germany.

Consumers have always had the power to complain to advertisers. But writing a letter to a company via snail mail that slowly navigates the inboxes of corporate bureaucracy pales in comparison to the power of instantaneous worldwide communication. Campaigns can now be brought down in days, if not hours. While print launched earlier, the new Motrin online campaign created by Taxi caught the attention of several influencers on Twitter Friday night, November 14, 2008, resulting in a weekend social media firestorm. The campaign was pulled November 16. Months of planning, ideation, developing and producing creative work were blown apart in one weekend. The underlying concept of the campaign was to empathize with moms over the back pain that results from “Wearing your baby,” as with slings and infant carriers. Some Twitter users interpreted this as an accusation that women were using their babies as fashion accessories and were incensed, including the proprietor of an online children’s store who created “Motrin ad makes moms mad,” a video of Twitter microblogs she posted on YouTube. J&J’s McNeil Consumer Healthcare pulled the Motrin website, and replaced it with an apology from its VP of Marketing, who also scrambled to e-mail direct apologies to bloggers. Perhaps there is no small irony in that the last time McNeil experienced such a massive public relations nightmare was the 1982 Tylenol tampering incident, a much more serious issue by comparison.

In the PepsiMax case, suicide survivors and friends and families of suicide victims were outraged by a campaign concept of depicting one lonely calorie (in quirky illustration) trying to kill himself. The print campaign was created by BBDO Dusseldorf and ran in one issue of one German publication. December 1 and 2, message boards and blogs around the globe were popping with commentary, almost all negative and emotionally charged—decrying the very idea of making light of suicide. As of this writing, the AdAge.com message board following the article had 51 comments; all but four were from the U.S. Never known for boldness in advertising, Pepsi immediately scrapped the

ads, their spokesman agreeing that they were “totally inappropriate.” Another campaign dead, mere days after it launched.

While I won’t defend the merits of either carrying your baby as fashion or one lonely calorie committing suicide, these incidents do not bode well for creativity in the digital age. Of its very nature, work that is truly creative is provocative, unexpected, and in the words of David Ogilvy, “makes the client squirm in his seat.” That kind of work gets noticed and jolts the consumer out of complacency. Work that is safe and acceptable rarely connects with people, or persuades. But creativity is a tender, fragile commodity. It thrives in an atmosphere of openness and possibility. It takes a strong, brave agency team to nurture, support, and sell unexpected answers to problems. Most clients have a hard enough time making a bold move without quantifiable support, so in an atmosphere of fear, bold creative ideas are even less likely to see the light of day.

Stretching limits has always been a difficult challenge, After all, only a handful of people have the talent to create brilliant advertising, but every layperson feels competent to judge and kill ideas. And while it takes every bit as much time and pain to develop a creative idea these days, social media make killing it so much quicker and easier. These two cases serve as a warning alarm of the frightening power that social media may exert on creative content. Creating truly daring work may become impossible if a small band of “vocal” malcontents has the power to dictate what can and can’t run. The only thing worse than letting a focus group dictate your advertising would be letting a few dozen bloggers do it.

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Suicide survivors and families of suicide victims found little humor in one lonely calorie trying to off himself, despite the lighthearted illustration style. Pepsi responded to social media criticism via social media, e-mailing direct apologies to bloggers.

"Wearing your baby is in fashion. There's the front  back carrier, sling, shwing and the pouch. Holding your baby so close is supposed to make them cry less. But what about me? I think I cry more. Carriers put a ton of strain on your back and shoulders. But I'll put up with the pain because it's a good pain, a worthy pain. And it totally makes me look like an official mom, so if I look tired and crazy, people will know why."

Motrin
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A small but influential group of angry women claimed this Motrin campaign trivialized baby carrying and used blogs, YouTube and Twitter to kill it. J&J pulled down the website 48 hours after the social media firestorm began.