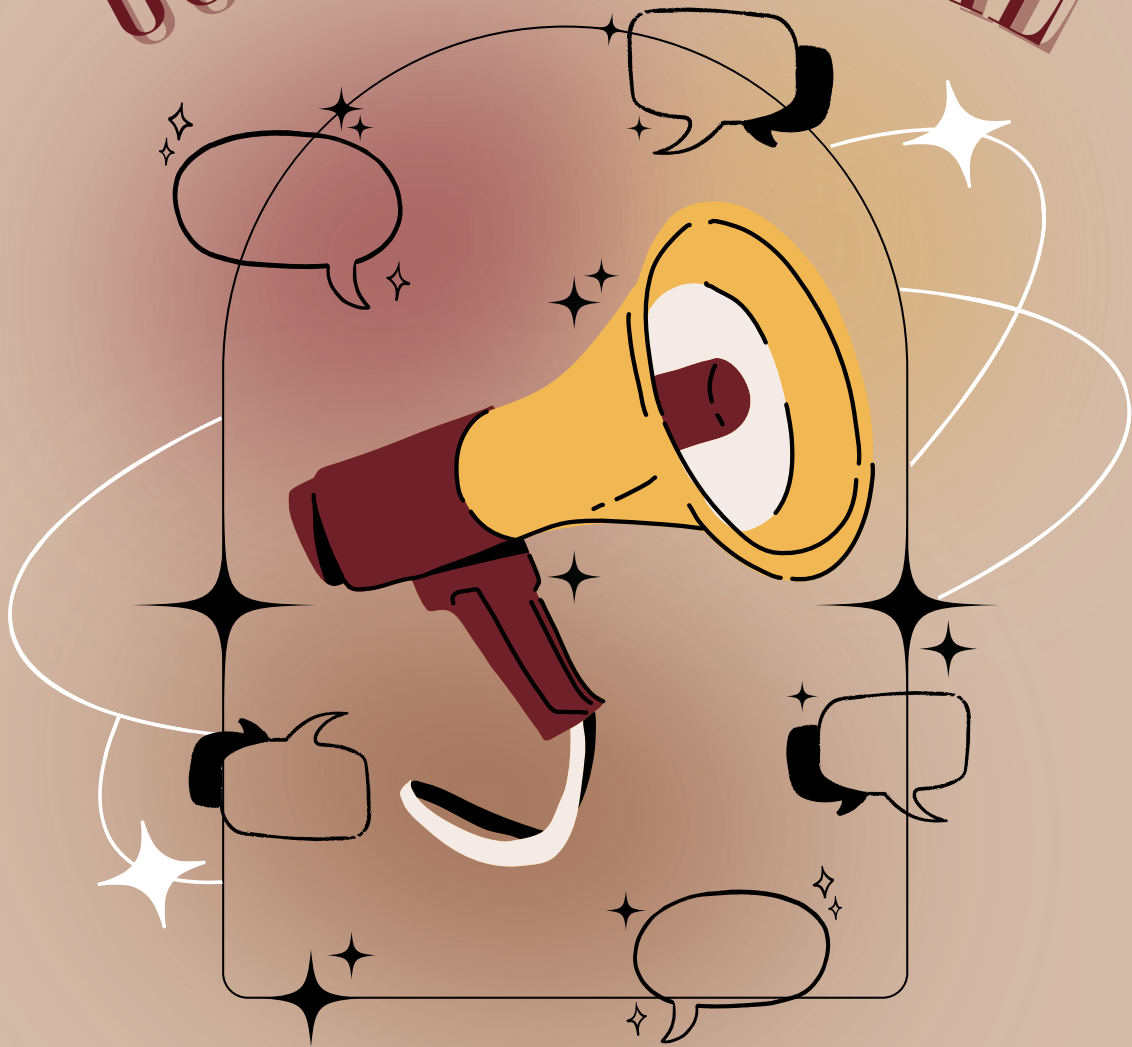




CONTROVERSIAL



MARKETING: ^{??}

From Controversy to Cash

By Pearl Huang

What is

Controversial Marketing?

Controversial Marketing is a tactic whereby a brand intentionally offends or surprises their audience by **violating the social norm**.

“ **But since when did brands want to offend people?** ”

Controversy is often manufactured by businesses to **generate a buzz**. They go out of their way to shock people who aren't their target market in order to widen their platform.

✦ **This is how brands can leverage controversy.** ✦



Figure 1: Apple's 2017 ads feature a screen divided into two regions: a gray half labeled "your phone" and a light blue half labeled "iPhone."

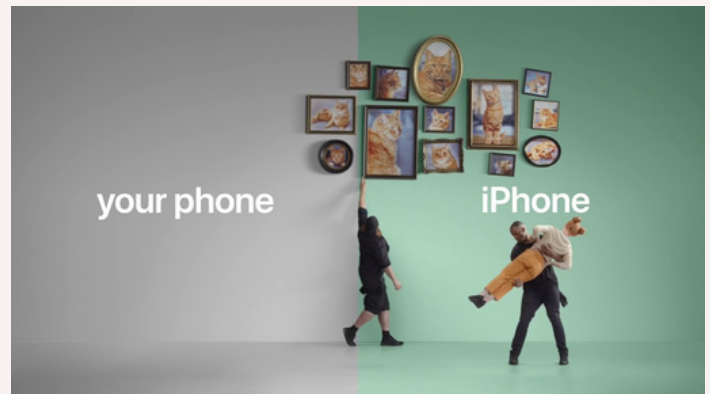
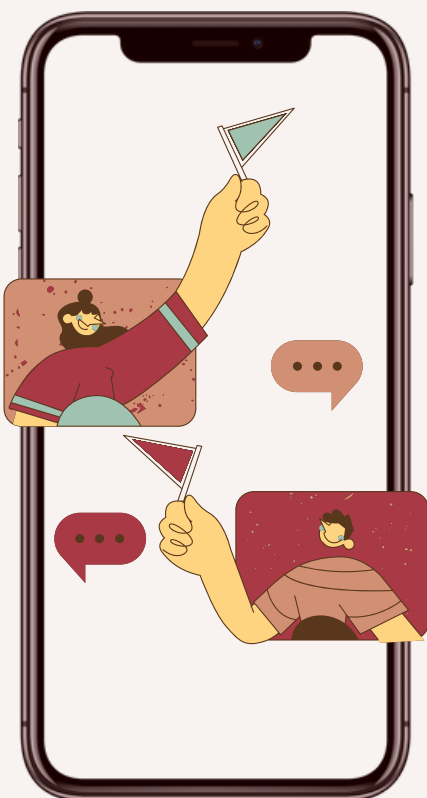


Figure 2: The 2017 'Switch to Apple campaign' lures customers over to iPhone, with a series of 15-second social spots to promote its phones.



In our digital age, all ads can be accessed online. And since anything created online stays there, once a controversial marketing campaign goes viral, a **compounding, domino effect** starts. Social media algorithms are designed to **reward viral posts**, like the ones we see circulating our Tik-Tok for-you pages and Instagram feeds. One person may share the ad with their 500 friends or followers and then those 500 share it with another 500 users each. All of this **exposure** then **attracts more** of the brand's target market and, in theory, will generate more **attention** onto their products and services. The brand prioritises their current audience over potential customers, simultaneously **playing the gamble** that their controversy may actually bring further attention and attract new consumers.

This is how brands can **leverage** controversy.

But how far is too far?

The Controversy of **Controversial Marketing** ✨

Controversial marketing is not just used to raise awareness about a certain brand; it is also sometimes used to **bring attention** to a public service issue, a health issue or some social cause.

For instance, you may see advertisements that use **graphic images**, such as ones that ask you to quit smoking. These are perfect examples of how controversial marketing can be used to draw **attention to a social cause**. While these may not seem uncommon, nor particularly controversial, some brands have taken a much riskier approach in using controversy to promote themselves.

It's a high-risk, high-reward stunt.

The Oreo example 🍪

Let's take a look at a campaign that worked very well in the brand's favour. On June 25th 2012, Oreo uploaded the following photo on its Facebook page:



Figure 3: A gay-pride-themed picture featuring a six-layer cookie coloured like a rainbow.

It was a rainbow themed Oreo cookie with tiers of rainbow creme filling, celebrating and showing support for the lesbian, gay, bisexual,

and transgender community. This simple photo, with the tagline "**June 25 | Pride**," was accompanied by the caption "**Proudly support love!**", creating a storm on the internet.

An outpour of both **positive** and **negative** responses were directed to Oreo, who ventured into this hot-button topic. While opponents of gay rights began calling for boycott of Oreo cookies, Oreo smartly got what it wanted - **the limelight**.

Within the next 2 days, the post received more than 192,000 likes, over 28,800 comments, and more than 57,800 shares. And the best part?

The ad was well-aligned with **Oreo's corporate values - diversity & freedom**. This is how Oreo very cleverly used controversy to draw its existing fanbase even closer together.

But what happens when things don't go to plan?

The Dove example

Time and time again, the soap-making company has found itself in the midst of controversy.

In 2011, Dove shared a Facebook advert depicting three women side-by-side. The **black woman** was positioned in front of the wall reading “before”, while a **white woman** was positioned in front of the panel reading “after”.

A woman of skin tone between the two shades was placed between the black and the white woman, indicating some sort of gradient of **darkest to lightest** corresponding to the cleanliness and purity of the skin.



Figure 4: Three women of differing skin-tones, standing in front of 'before' and 'after' panels, depicting the benefits of using Dove's VisibleCare body wash.

The controversial racist streak of the company continued in 2017. Dove published another Facebook post showing the “**transformation**” of a **black woman** into a **white woman** by removing her “dirty” brown shirt – along with her skin colour too.



Figure 5: Another Dove ad, attempting to demonstrate the benefits of using their body wash in 'cleaning' and 'purifying' the customer's skin.

Controversy in marketing campaigns is something becoming more commonly used and more accepted by today's audiences. If **done correctly**, it can be a great way to get your brand **noticed**. If it backfires, it can do **more harm** than good.

With these two controversial advertisements, Dove received **endless public backlash**, with virtually **no support**. Dove has shown us the consequences of missing the mark with advertising, and what makes ‘**acceptable**’ and ‘**unacceptable**’ controversies.



Now, what happens when blatantly unethical controversy actually works?

The GoDaddy example

Go Daddy is a web hosting firm. They've changed up their brand, but if we look at their early days they commonly used **raunchy, sexist and offensive** ads to get their name in every news outlet possible.

They flaunted female sexuality in attempts to **attract attention** from their core demographic of younger men, and unintentionally caused controversy with many women — a **demographic** that wasn't even their **target**.

Go Daddy built a huge brand by **upsetting** people who weren't their core demographic. And now they are one of the **largest**, most **profitable** web hosts in North America. Prior to the Super Bowl in 2013, their market share in domain names was 16%. After that, it was 25%. The next year, 32%.



Figure 6: As a part of Go Daddy's new "Smart Meets Sexy" campaign, Super Model Bar Rafaeli shares an extremely long kiss with character actor Jesse Haiman.

The campaign worked not just for the **brand**, but also the **business**, with Go Daddy having grown into the billion dollar business it is today.. So from a marketing standpoint, their campaign based on sex appeal was in fact, **very effective**.

So...

Should we use it?

While it may seem appealing to create a controversial ad that brings your **brand** into the **spotlight**, what we've learnt from the history of controversial marketing, is that it's **all circumstantial**.

At the end of the day, it's ultimately up to a brand's audience to decide whether its advertisements are **socially** or **ethically** appropriate or not, and whether the campaign should be **applauded** or **critiqued**. There's a very fine line to watch out for.

So... From controversy to cash, or from controversy to cancelled?



Thanks for reading!
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