VOL 64, SEPTEMBER 2025

TESTING TIMES

Crisis communication strategies and responses in the spotlight

KEY LEARNING POINTS

- HONESTY FIRST
- OWN YOUR DECISIONS
- BE CLEAR ABOUT REPUTATION
- ALIGN WITH VALUES

WHAT HAPPENED?

Advertising has often been the source of crises that hits brands and with a growth in 'outrage marketing', the tactic has been put under the spotlight. In the latest situation, cosmetics brand e.l.f. had to apologise when it used a controversial comedian in its recently launched campaign. The overpriced beauty campaign used comedian Matt Rife within the advertising. Rife has a substantial TikTok following which was one of the reasons he was chosen for the campaign. But he was heavily criticised in 2023 when he joked about domestic abuse on a comedy special.

There was immediate criticism once the campaign was launched in mid-August which prompted an apology from the cosmetics brand. But many wanted this to go further than an apology as they demanded that the campaign was pulled and the video with Rife removed from social media. At the time this edition of Testing Times went to press, there had been no attempt to remove the advert which initially features on Instagram.

The comedian made no comment but did support the campaign through messages on social media. Other creators did comment and some publicly withdrew support for the brand. It follows on the heels of other controversial advertising campaigns including the Sydney Sweeney jeans advert. This has led to questions about brands using outrage marketing in an attempt to be heard in an increasingly crowded marketplace.

What can communication and business learn from the situation?

The cosmetics brand wrote on Instagram after the criticism and backlash began. The comment said "You know us, we're always listening, and we've heard you. This campaign aimed to humorously spotlight beauty injustice. We understand we missed the mark with people we care about in our e.l.f. community."

However, the comments did not appear to translate into the actions as the campaign advert was still on their Instagram page and was not removed. Many will have assumed that they should have expected the response that happened, as in the advert Rife says "I know a thing or two about red flags." It leads to the conclusion that this controversy was expected and even cultivated by making the connection with the comedian.

The company's chief marketing officer was interviewed for an article in Business of Fashion and said she was surprised by the response and how it 'missed the mark'. She continued to say that the brand aimed to promote positivity, and this situation did not feel good. Despite many media contacting them for comment, none was provided and instead they remained with the Instagram post as the only point of explanation.

The apology was heavily criticised for not being accompanied by any action to take the post down, and for appearing to attempt humour within it. Whether the backlash and influencer criticism will lead to financial repercussions for the brand, we will have to wait and see.

What do we need to remember in this situation?

- Be honest if you are caught out – e.l.f could have held their hands up and admitted to making a genuine error or that they knew this would spark a backlash.
- Use outrage with care – if this had been the purpose of the advertising campaign then own it and explain the approach. Some people may not like it, but others will recognise the transparency.
- Reputation is about more than the customers – there will be stakeholders, investors and others who will have a view about the approach taken and they need to be considered.
- Align with your values – a big selling point for e.l.f. is the ethical and cruelty free logos that they use which makes the campaign choice feel even more out of step.
- Use humour with care – the statement from e.l.f. was criticised for being dismissive and appearing to try and use humour about a serious issue.
- Concern can be infectious – people who may not have known the brand will get involved in the criticism and this could be curtailing future customers from purchasing the brand's products.
- Know where you go next – the issue will linger on social media, the Internet and in AI related searches so be clear how you will address any long-term impact.

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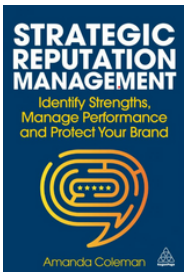

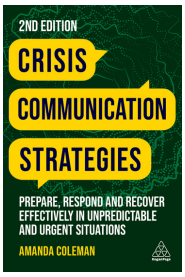

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