

# Corporate brands and the false promises of socially aware advertising

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On top of a mid-city apartment building, a gorgeous young man of Asian descent passionately plays the cello. Inside her spacious loft apartment, an equally dazzling young Arab woman wearing a hijab is marking the contact sheets in her spacious studio. And while an ethnically diverse but remarkably orderly crowd of young protesters swarms the streets bearing color-coordinated signs that say "Peace" and "Join the Conversation," worldwide celebrity Kendall Jenner is inside a restaurant doing a fashion shoot. Distracted by the protest, the reality TV star pulls off her blond wig, wipes off her make-up, and joins the protest. As the group then faces off with a line of impossibly good-looking policemen, Kendall, encouraged by the Gorgeous Cellist, grabs a conveniently-placed can of ice-cold Pepsi and hands it to the cutest cop while the Dazzling Photographer snaps a picture, upon which the crowd erupts in wild cheers. What are they protesting? It's hard to tell: the signs they carry are so meaningless and generic that they become unintentionally hilarious. What inspires Kendall Jenner to walk away from her lucrative photo shoot? Surely not a sudden distaste for the fashion industry's objectification of women and its creation of arbitrary beauty standards. And why does the crowd erupt in cheers when the Cute Cop accepts that can of soda? Have the protestors' goals been achieved? Were they demanding the right to hand free soft drinks to law enforcement officers? Is Pepsi encouraging young people to take to the streets and protest in general?

As the massive backlash against the instantly-infamous commercial demonstrated, Pepsi's embarrassingly tone-deaf "Live For Now" ad is one of the most egregious examples of corporations trying – and failing – to gain some valuable street cred through "socially aware advertising." Desperate as always to connect to the ever-elusive youth market, the ad has been justifiably ridiculed for what it reveals about how creative directors and corporate executives imagine millennials' current cultural and political sensibilities.

In this case, the fall-out was so violent that Pepsi decided to withdraw the expensive commercial after just a few days, conceding defeat in the face of online ridicule from the very audience it had hoped to attract. The Pepsi debacle may be an extreme example of this kind of marketing misfire, but it also typifies a larger trend in advertising. Transnational corporations that traditionally steered clear of anything even remotely controversial have discovered the commercial power of socially aware messaging. Where companies used to compete for audience attention simply by repeating and exaggerating the benefits of their product, they now engage primarily in the incremental construction of social and cultural capital. For while corporations obviously still want you to buy whatever it is they're selling, it has become even more important for them to develop long-term relationships with consumers who recognize their values in those brands.

Soap corporation Dove, for instance, has for years now developed a massively successful promotional campaign that revolves around the construction of authenticity. Their commercials and billboards foreground "real" women rather than the "fake" ones we usually associate with advertising – particularly from the cosmetics industry. One advertisement in particular became a viral hit, as it deconstructed a stereotypically glossy image of a woman by showing in fast motion how much manipulation had taken place in the process from original photograph to final image. It was the kind of video one might associate with feminist activism rather than corporate advertising, which is exactly why it contributed so strongly to the Dove brand's value amongst critical and discerning consumers.

This example perfectly sums up the logic of brand culture: in our current cultural, political, and economic environment, the traditional distinction between the authentic and the commercial has all but evaporated. Corporations build their brands on the basis of narratives, images, and values that are perceived as authentic and meaningful to its desired audience. Apple has been one of the pioneers of this kind of strategy, carefully constructing its brand identity with its hugely impactful "Think Different" campaign, which connected the Apple logo with iconic images of politically charged figures like Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Muhammad Ali, Bob Dylan, and Nelson Mandela. The ambitious and ingeniously designed poster campaign never included any mention of specific Apple products: it merely associated the brand with celebrities who are widely celebrated for their innovative and iconoclastic qualities, thereby subtly legitimizing the brand and imbuing it with similar values.

This trend has become more pronounced as media companies and businesses alike have shifted from broadcasting to narrowcasting: rather than addressing the largest possible audience, advertisers are focusing their messages on a much more specific demographic, or even on particular subcultures. Where we used to think of "mass media" and "mainstream culture," we have now grown accustomed to a new set of terms that describes the much more fragmented nature of digital culture: we now inhabit a world of filter bubbles, user profiles, and on-demand culture. This narrowcasting strategy perfectly matches the era in which brand-based corporations like Nike no longer operate as industrial producers of goods: instead, corporations foreground their brand identities while becoming increasingly flexible in the kinds of products and services they provide. Amazon offers a telling illustration of this way of thinking: what once began as an online book

store has become an all-encompassing transnational delivery service that will sell you just about anything you can imagine. Like similar digital service platforms, from Uber to AirBNB, Amazon offers flexible and competitively-priced services without the substantial overhead costs that come from owning factories or other forms of robust material capital. And like so many others, it too has attempted to construct its brand identity on the basis of socially aware messaging. One commercial from 2016, for instance, tried to respond to rampant islamophobia in western countries by releasing a commercial in which a Catholic priest and a Muslim imam have tea together, after which they both make the decision to order leg supports from Amazon for their aging knees. Without addressing the actual causes of racism or islamophobia, it provides an easily consumable "can't we all just get along" sentiment that nevertheless associates the Amazon brand with social awareness.

Even more impactful was the widely shared online video "Worlds Apart," in which people from opposite ends of the political spectrum were brought together to share a Heineken: a white Men's Rights Activist with a black feminist, an environmentalist with a climate change denier, a homophobe with a transgender woman, etc. The various pairs of strangers first get to know each other while constructing a miniature beer bar, then watch a short video in which the other person reveals their values and beliefs, and are finally given the choice to stay and have a beer together or leave the room alone. The predictable result was a flattering portrait of people overcoming their difference and learning to see each other in a new light, as the homophobe develops a grudging respect for the transgender woman he's been talking with.

As appealing as such widely-shared commercials might be, their level of engagement with the social and political issues at stake is at the very least superficial and sentimental. While many of these commercials try to incorporate the values and vocabulary of actual progressive activism, they do so in ways that are minimally offensive to mainstream consumers and that are transparently designed to bolster the existing brand identity without actually committing to any particular program. Commercials like these unfailingly suggest that the solution to social problems lie with the individual's personal decisions – as if racism was a kind of lifestyle choice in the same way one chooses a particular brand of beer. They inevitably pander to privileged audiences whose self-image is flattered by “socially aware” messaging that makes you feel good about yourself while buying a product or service associated with vaguely liberal values. Never do they address the question to what extent those very same businesses contribute directly to those very problems: by recklessly exploiting the most vulnerable populations for cheap labor, by endangering the planet by wasteful and unsustainable production practices, and by exacerbating social and economic differences by appealing directly to values derived primarily from class identity.

Therefore, it is imperative that we maintain a healthy dose of cynicism when we encounter yet another viral video preaching social awareness on behalf of a billion-dollar corporation. Before we click on “like,” “share,” or “retweet,” let’s bear in mind that even the most well-intentioned and seemingly sincere forms of socially aware advertising exist in the first place to cultivate brand loyalty towards businesses whose single real imperative is generating financial profits for their shareholders. And let’s try to remember as well that overcoming the sharpest divisions in our society today even runs counter to their interests as businesses. If we seek not only to understand these divisions, but to develop productive ways of overcoming them, we may be better served by supporting the work of non-profit organizations, of a critical and independent press, of artists, musicians, and educators, and, of course, of documentary photographers.

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