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5 Questions with Lee Ann Walker: When brands come under fire

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1. In the age of social media and the 24-hour news cycle, business crises' blow up quickly and companies can come under fire in an instant. Recently, we've seen this happen with [Calvin Klein's #mycalvin marketing campaign](#) and last year with [Anheuser-Busch InBev and their "Up For Whatever" campaign](#). Due to this constant risk, [some experts feel that building and protecting a brand is more important and more challenging than ever before](#). How important is branding and why is it potentially becoming more challenging?

Perhaps the easiest way to illustrate the value of a brand is to think of it in regards to your reputation and how others perceive you. Good people want to be surrounded by those that are confident, honest, hardworking, willing to give back, and whose actions are ethical and moral. This is also true of customers and their loyalty to brands. A lot of marketing deals with consumer behavior and the psychology behind the buying process. So in essence, if a company falls short in understanding how a campaign will be perceived, it runs the risk of being on the hot seat. There has never been a time in our communication history where brands have the ability to reach thousands so quickly, with a simple Tweet or Facebook or Instagram post, as they do today. The problem is when the message goes beyond the "fans" to the binding communities (fans, not fans, and those who just don't care). These binding communities are where the message gets into trouble, for example when Calvin Klein's Instagram ad, "I flash in #mycalvins," showed a young woman with an upskirt shot, it turned from trendy to distasteful for many, and consumers became outraged.

2. Should the current climate change the way companies market themselves, and should companies be taking less risks when marketing?

For several reasons, I don't think the current climate will alter how most companies market themselves. In the example of Calvin Klein, they have always conducted themselves on the edge of being racy, just look at the ads



from the 1980s where most of the subjects are wearing nothing. Risky campaign marketing is not new; it is just new to some, because the reach of social media is far greater. In the case of Anheuser-Busch, they felt the backlash was too much, and did cease using the slogan on their labels, but an unusual argument ensued. While many consumers felt it was distasteful, others argued that the slogan would not make anyone alter their behavior and saw no issue with it.. To stand out, I think companies have to take risks, but they must understand with some risks comes consequences, and they

need to have a plan in place for repercussions. Think of the saying, we have freedom of speech, but it does not mean freedom from consequences. It is also important to note that social media has provided companies with a platform, however it has also provided social cause and advocacy groups with an equal platform. This is important because more than just customers are watching these big brands.

3. If something like this does happen to a company and their brand is attacked and tarnished, how can it be repaired?

I think back to my early days in marketing when many would say, "Any publicity is good publicity." We know now that is not necessarily true. If a company takes a risk and it gets mixed reviews, they must address it - be proactive in the process. Assume responsibility and accountability, but don't get that confused with the need to apologize, because there is a difference. It just means they need to take a stand and stay steadfast. This is where you decide to weather the storm or turn around and go back to the dock. Brands that get tarnished can often pick themselves back up and recover very nicely. Especially if the campaign did not result in harm or injury to the consumer.

4. On several occasions public relations mishaps have severally tarnished a company's brand, like [in the case of athletic outfitter Lululemon](#). How can Marketing and Public Relations work together to avoid causing brand damage and to manage the situation when it does occur?

When public relation mishaps occur, like the comments of the founder of Lululemon being labeled as "fat shaming", it can be a seemingly hard road to recovery. However, much like other examples presented, there are always two sides (theirs and yours) and three truths (theirs, yours, and reality) to consider. In this case, the founder's comments became less important as the issue evolved into the quality of the product, which resulted in the company pulling the yoga pants from shelves. Comments can be overcome with time, but when quality is compromised - that is non-negotiable for consumers. Marketing and PR can provide the company with the ability to communicate quickly to the customer. Often times consumers are satisfied with just knowing they are heard, but when the company can show there is a problem resolution underway, it can gain a bit more trust back that might have been lost.

5. What are some companies that are doing a remarkable job branding in 2016 and what practices are they using that others can emulate?

There are many incredible brands doing wonderful things, including Coca-Cola, Tide, Disney, and Starbucks just to name a few. The key is to find a balance between the risks and the rewards. Businesses have to move away from just brand marketing and move towards creating the brand experience. This is accomplished by being personal and focusing on building humanity. As consumers, we are surrounded by negativity all day, the last thing we want to see is negative ads that make us “feel” bad. Consumers acclimate to positive ads, ones that humanize and inspire, ones that make us laugh, or ones that make us think.

Dr. Lee Ann Walker is the Academic Program Manager for the [Marketing MBA Program in the Malcolm Baldrige School of Business at Post University](#). Walker holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of North Florida, a Master of Business Administration in Marketing from American InterContinental University and a Doctorate of Business Administration from Walden University. Walker has targeted, professional experience in marketing, advertising, graphic design, corporate branding, social media branding, and customer service in both for-profit and nonprofit organizations.

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