

Managing Brand Image in the Digital Era: A Strategic Analysis of Dove's Advertising Controversy and Recovery Strategy

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Abstract: Dove's 2017 advertising incident, which sparked widespread debate regarding perceived cultural insensitivity, highlighted a disconnect between the brand's "Real Beauty" positioning and public reception. In response, this study proposes a strategic digital recovery framework, including revised campaign content, transparent communication through social media, and data-driven customer segmentation based on diverse skincare needs and cultural backgrounds. A PESTLE analysis underscores the importance of digital transformation and rising social consciousness in brand management. Findings suggest that inclusive messaging, precision targeting, and omnichannel digital engagement are key to restoring brand trust and reputation in the digital landscape.

Keywords: Brand crisis; Digital marketing; Omnichannel strategy; Precision targeting; Customer segmentation; Inclusive branding

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Dove brand overview

Dove was founded in 1957, and its global expansion began in 1999. Today, Dove is the world's number-one cleaning brand, with sales in more than 80 countries and annual sales of more than 2.5 billion euros. Its success depends not only on the quality of its products but also on years of precise and targeted advertising. As early as 2006, Dove identified the problem of stereotypes that defined women's beauty and used this as a key entry point for marketing, creating the Dove Self-Esteem Project, which conducted several surveys and studies worldwide. Through research, Dove found that more than half of women worldwide have a poor opinion of their appearance, and up to 70% of women worldwide believe that external praise for their appearance and body is more likely to help them build confidence ^[1].

Dove followed up with "The Campaign for Real Beauty," a marketing campaign that emphasizes to

consumers that true beauty is not limited to white skin, long straight hair, and a perfect body, but rather that beauty is real and diverse, that each woman is a unique being full of personality. That true beauty exists in the form of a special person. Each woman is special, and true beauty exists in different shapes, sizes, ages, and skin tones. At the same time, Dove invited nine women who were confident and different from traditional beauty standards to model for the campaign, conveying different forms of beauty to the audience. Dove's anti-stereotyping marketing approach proved successful. This new form of advertising, which overturned the previous use of glamorous appearance to attract consumers' attention, helped women build self-confidence. At the same time, consumers' goodwill towards the brand was also naturally achieved.

1.2. Marketing controversy

In 2017, Unilever's Dove brand released an advertisement on its Facebook page that featured a visual sequence in which an African American woman appeared to transition into a White woman after applying body lotion, followed by a similar transition into an Asian woman ^[2]. This advertisement aimed to portray diverse forms of beauty. However, it provoked a heated online backlash. Many internet users accused Dove of lacking cultural sensitivity in the commercial. More than 3,000 comments under the tweet were overwhelmingly negative, and numerous social media users called for a boycott of the company's products.

It is evident from the public response to the advertisement that Dove's marketing approach encountered significant backlash. The primary causes of this setback appear to include insufficient understanding and consideration of diverse cultural backgrounds, the delivery of content perceived as inappropriate or potentially misleading, and a failure to align with the brand's stated commitment to celebrating diversity in beauty. Although this marketing controversy may not have an immediate impact on Dove's sales performance, the negative effect on brand reputation is apparent. Some consumers from underrepresented ethnic groups may reconsider their purchasing decisions in response to the incident. As a result, it is essential for Dove to implement a comprehensive strategy to restore its brand image. In today's era of rapid digital communication, where individuals consistently use online platforms to access and disseminate information, the effective use of digital media and social networks presents a viable pathway for brand recovery. This study proposes a digital portfolio strategy aimed at addressing the brand reputation challenge arising from this marketing controversy.

2. Digital portfolio

2.1. New advertising campaign

2.1.1. Revised ad content strategies

Timely revisions and replacing ambiguous advertising content would have minimized the damage to the brand's image from the failed campaign. They would have gone some way to calming emotional social media users. The main reason for the failure was that Dove did not truly follow its "Real Beauty" brand promise to consumers. The divisive nature of the campaign, which featured black models turning white after using Dove products, meant that viewers might have thought the campaign sent a signal that white skin was the standard of beauty. Although this may not have been Dove's intention, the lack of thoroughness and consideration in the production and marketing of the ad inevitably gave consumers the illusion of "visual metaphors" and caused strong dissatisfaction. Therefore, the first step in this crisis is to replace ambiguous ads with new ones. The following are two options for new content.

One of the most immediate and straightforward adjustments would be to alter the sequence of model

appearances in the advertisement. For example, the advertisement could begin with a model of lighter skin tone, who then transitions into a model with a darker skin tone, followed by a model with an intermediate skin tone. Such a change might reduce the degree of negative emotional response among certain audience groups and lower the risk of the advertisement being perceived as exhibiting cultural insensitivity. Nevertheless, given that any portrayal involving changes in skin tone may inadvertently lead individuals of specific backgrounds to feel singled out or misrepresented, a more effective approach could be to adopt a creative concept that avoids such associations altogether.

Secondly, an alternative approach could involve dividing the screen into three parallel panels, each featuring a different model with distinct skin tones, where each model is compared only to her own appearance before and after using Dove products. For example, prior to using the products, individuals may feel a need for greater self-confidence due to a perceived skin condition. After product application, the skin may appear more hydrated and radiant, thereby enhancing self-confidence and overall sense of well-being. The accompanying text could emphasize that beauty is diverse and cannot be defined by a single standard. This format not only underscores the functional benefits of the product but also conveys a constructive response to prior criticism, demonstrating the brand's commitment to equitable representation and its willingness to address concerns in a respectful and inclusive manner.

2.1.2. Expanding digital channels

Dove's strategic use of digital media platforms for crisis communication following a marketing controversy can serve as an effective reputational recovery approach. Senior executives could issue formal, empathetic statements via official social media accounts such as Facebook and Twitter, directly acknowledging the shortcomings in the campaign and addressing concerns regarding cultural representation. Such a transparent and proactive response may help preserve existing customer loyalty, as demonstrating a constructive attitude toward problem-solving can mitigate emotionally charged public reactions. Additionally, as discussions on social media gain traction, the heightened visibility may indirectly enhance brand awareness and introduce the company to new audiences, thereby creating opportunities for future market growth. In this sense, digital crisis communication can also function as a supplementary promotional tool.

Furthermore, Dove could consider shifting the emphasis of its promotional strategy from primarily offline channels to a more robust online presence, leveraging social media to foster constructive engagement. Given that online discourse surrounding the incident continues to attract public attention, the brand could utilize this momentum to disseminate content that reinforces its core values—such as the belief that beauty is best expressed through authenticity and should not be constrained by external definitions or physical attributes. Over time, as misconceptions surrounding the controversy diminish, such consistent value-driven messaging has the potential to cultivate a more positive and inclusive brand image for Dove.

2.2. New customer segmentation strategy

2.2.1. Customer understanding through cultural awareness

Customer segmentation and targeted marketing strategies enable Dove to design tailored promotional initiatives that align with diverse consumer needs and motivations. Consumers may engage with similar product categories for varied purposes, and a narrow focus on a single consumer profile risks alienating other segments. To mitigate the adverse effects of prior marketing controversies, Dove should consider re-segmenting its customer base

through structured market research, such as online and offline surveys. This segmentation can group consumers according to factors such as needs, preferences, price sensitivity, and lifestyle characteristics. Given that different demographic groups may exhibit distinct cultural norms, skincare routines, and dermatological needs, it is essential for personal care brands to prioritize product suitability for varying skin conditions and to develop culturally attuned marketing content, thereby avoiding ambiguous or potentially misinterpreted advertising messages.

As an initial step in the recovery strategy, Dove could categorize consumers into three broad demographic clusters based on shared characteristics, followed by direct surveys to identify the primary requirements of each cluster. Key research questions may include: What product attributes are most valued by each group? What functional benefits do consumers expect the product to deliver to their skin? Additionally, leveraging advanced analytics and big data can provide deeper market insights by identifying patterns in online behavior—such as frequently visited websites, common search terms, and purchase histories—within specific geographic regions. This information can be used to refine marketing messages and product positioning. Furthermore, Dove could enhance its online retail platform by incorporating segmented product navigation modules based on criteria such as skin type, sensitivity, and moisturization needs. Such an approach would enable a more personalized shopping experience, increasing the likelihood of meeting diverse consumer expectations. Ultimately, while certain core market preferences may appear uniform, recognizing and addressing nuanced differences is critical to achieving broader customer satisfaction and sustainable brand recovery.

2.2.2. Precision marketing

Compared with traditional offline marketing channels such as print media or public transport advertisements, digital marketing enables more precise audience targeting. Based on insights into consumer preferences, Dove can strategically place promotional content on frequently visited websites or within popular television programs. These campaigns may incorporate messages that emphasize inclusivity and respect for diversity alongside commercial product promotion, thereby aligning brand communication with broader social values. This approach is not intended to replace offline marketing but rather to emphasize the complementary relationship between online and offline strategies. For example, Dove could integrate online promotional activities with in-store experiential programs, enabling consumers to first acquire product knowledge through digital channels and subsequently engage in hands-on trials at physical retail locations. Such a hybrid approach can enhance customer engagement, build trust, and facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of product benefits. This combination of online and offline omnichannel marketing drives brand development ^[3]. This omnichannel marketing approach can take advantage of digital media to spread the brand message quickly. Still, it also allows consumers to enjoy the real feeling of using the product, which can better promote consumption.

3. Literature review

According to Kotler et al. ^[4], the digital era is referred to as the marketing 4.0 era, which is an approach to marketing that combines online and offline interactions between companies and their customers ^[4]. With digital integration into all aspects of business life and the ability of consumers to conduct purchasing activities through many channels, omnichannel marketing has become an emerging strategic phenomenon ^[5]. From the surface meaning of the phrase, omnichannel represents all channels together ^[6]. Companies that adopt omnichannel marketing need to use as many channels as possible to reach their target consumers. Whether it is social media,

email, news studies, or magazines, companies can gain new opportunities through these marketing channels ^[7]. Compared to traditional channel marketing, omnichannel integrates online and mobile in addition to physical and digital, enabling brands' advertising messages to be disseminated and noticed efficiently. Research by Gupta et al. ^[8] and Shah et al. ^[9] indicates that customer-centricity is a characteristic of omnichannel marketing. Whether through online channels or physical stores, consumers can shop for merchandise. High consumer acceptance or ratings are desired. In that case, companies adopting omnichannel marketing need to focus on consumers' search preferences and purchase behavior on online sites, subjective norms, and their perceptions of search behavior on online sites ^[7]. Nakano and Kondo ^[10] focused on purchase channels and media touchpoints to segment consumers. The idea proposed in this study is also to develop customer segmentation strategies regarding consumers' online browsing and purchasing preferences. Mateus ^[11] also showed that companies can offer consumers personalized choices and products in the widest possible way through online channels and reach their target customers through an omnichannel strategy, developing all points of contact with them to optimize the relationship between the brand and the customer.

Even though it is true that omnichannel marketing can bring chances to firms by combining new digital channels, this does not mean that it is ideal. There are still certain drawbacks. Few businesses are truly omnichannel because of the blurred distinction between physical and online in the omnichannel environment ^[12]. Additionally, it is simple for businesses to become immersed in the rapid growth of digital and lose focus, which disrupts the traditional physical environment. According to numerous studies, many businesses cannot profit from the omnichannel market in this environment, instead even appearing to compete ^[13]. For example, most omnichannel merchants operate in siloed structures. In other words, brick-and-mortar and online stores operate independently and compete adversarially rather than fostering complementary relationships ^[14].

In conclusion, it can be observed that even though the omnichannel format is beneficial, it is inevitable that there will be an excessive number of channels from which to pick, which will surely cause the marketing process to become overwhelmed. Therefore, there is still a need to examine how to achieve a healthy balance and stability between channels.

4. Conclusion

4.1. Strengths and limitations

This study examines a case of unsuccessful marketing involving a Dove advertising campaign that was widely perceived as conveying culturally insensitive messages. By analyzing the potential causes and consequences of the incident, this research proposes a digital portfolio to assist Dove in addressing the issue and restoring its brand image. The proposed portfolio consists of three key components: a revised advertising campaign, re-segmentation of the customer base, and refined targeting strategies. Timely replacement of the contentious advertisements with revised versions serves as a form of crisis communication, mitigating the adverse impact of public opinion while attracting renewed consumer attention. The revised segmentation strategy classifies customers according to diverse skin characteristics across different demographic groups, enabling the application of big data analytics to deliver targeted marketing. This integrated approach addresses the immediate reputational challenges arising from the marketing failure while supporting Dove's long-term brand development.

Nevertheless, certain limitations exist within this digital portfolio. Given that the analysis centers on a single case of marketing misjudgment with perceived cultural insensitivity, the initial priority lies in correcting consumer

misconceptions regarding the brand's stance on diversity and inclusion. This can be achieved by providing contextual clarification and illustrative examples. The analysis does not, however, account for other contributing factors that may have influenced the campaign's failure. Furthermore, while the proposed customer segmentation approach enhances precision, it would require additional refinement and careful consideration to ensure effective application in practice.

4.2. PESTLE-based recommendations

In the aftermath of the early-2020s global health crisis, consumer spending in offline channels, such as physical retail stores, has declined, accompanied by a certain degree of global economic slowdown. Conversely, the digital economy experienced rapid growth during this period, with consumers increasingly shifting their purchasing behavior from traditional brick-and-mortar outlets to online platforms. This shift, while creating growth opportunities in e-commerce, has also intensified operational challenges for physical stores. The broader changes in the socio-economic environment have accelerated the adoption of digital consumption as a mainstream trend, presenting opportunities for companies pursuing omnichannel marketing strategies. For brands such as Dove, this transformation provides a pathway to address brand-related misperceptions through digital engagement channels, including social media.

Simultaneously, the process of digital transformation is closely tied to advancements in technology. The recovery strategies outlined in this study can only be effectively implemented with robust technical infrastructure, particularly in optimizing corporate websites and leveraging big data analytics for customer segmentation. However, it is important to note that the pace of regulatory updates may lag behind the rapid evolution of the digital environment, potentially leading to insufficient oversight in certain areas. This regulatory gap can, in some cases, enable enterprises to exploit legal loopholes or engage in unhealthy competitive practices, which may undermine long-term corporate sustainability. In conclusion, to navigate the current marketing challenge and ensure sustainable growth, Dove should capitalize on the opportunities presented by digitalization, employ technology-driven public relations initiatives, and mitigate the impact of reputational risks in a compliant and ethically sound manner.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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