

Dove and Axe: Examples of hypocrisy or good marketing?

Introduction

Should a company be criticized when one of its brands undertakes a campaign to improve the self-image of women around the world? In the fall of 2007, the Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood (CCFC), a respected Boston-based activist group, said “yes” if that company was Unilever. Citing differences in how two major Unilever brands positioned themselves, the CCFC claimed it was unfair for Dove to capitalize on the success of its “Campaign for Real Beauty” while Axe, another of Unilever’s brands, ran campaigns focusing on how its products increased the sexual appeal of young men, especially among physically attractive, suggestively dressed young women.

While the CCFC initially called only for an online letter-writing campaign to Unilever’s CEO, its discontent was publicized quickly through blogs and traditional media, raising awareness of the issue. Eventually, some activists, bloggers, and journalists alike were questioning the ethics of one company using what they deemed to be conflicting messages that exploited stereotypes for profit. Since the Campaign for Real Beauty’s message went beyond product promotion to social responsibility, working to improve the ways women evaluated their self-esteem and self-worth, the objectification of women in the Axe ads only fueled their complaints. Critics also noted both brands’ use of viral tactics, suggesting this reliance on the consumer to generate publicity only furthered the accusations of hypocrisy.

Unilever and Its Commitment to Customers

Unilever manages over 400 brands representing 14 categories of home, food and personal care products. Established in 1930 with the merger of Lever Brothers and Margarine Unie, British and Dutch companies respectively, Unilever's initial purpose was to eliminate competition between these companies' main products. After reorganizing its international operations following World War II, Unilever continued to increase its product offerings and the geographic scope of its operations throughout the twentieth century. In 2006, with over 179,000 employees in over 100 countries, Unilever produced a global operating profit of over €5 billion. Based on company research, Unilever's operations allow people in over 150 countries to choose its products an estimated 150 million times each day.¹

In developing these products, Unilever follows its mission of adding "vitality to life," identifying this quality as what defines and differentiates its brands. The company says this mission not only shapes the products it produces, but also its contributions to society, noting its culture reflects vitality by demanding "the highest standards of behavior towards everyone we work with, the communities we reach and the environments on which we have an impact." By adhering to this mission, Unilever hopes to "help people look good, feel good and get more out of life."²

In a speech given in 2003 at the London Business School, former chairman Niall Fitzgerald provided greater insight into how Unilever views the relationship between business and society. He said:

When we talk about corporate social responsibility, we don't see it as something we 'do' to society. It is inherent in everything we do. Not just voluntary

philanthropy or community investment, important though that is, but the impact of our operations and products as well as the interactions we have with the societies we serve.³

Patrick Cescau, current group CEO, echoed these feelings in a speech on social innovation delivered in October 2006. Mr. Cescau said, “[Corporate responsibility] isn’t philanthropy, it’s business...it’s about creating social benefits through our brands and through our interactions as a business with society.” Additionally, he identified building reputation as one of the four main components of the business case for social responsibility, along with sustainable development, growing markets and fueling innovation.⁴

To express its commitment to social responsibility, Unilever identified four partnerships that reflect its mission of vitality and relate to its two core business areas, food and home/personal care. These partnerships include work with UNICEF, the World Food Programme, the World Heart Federation and the FDI World Dental Federation; they reflect Unilever’s commitment to corporate social responsibility by improving health, minimizing environmental impact, developing sustainable supplies and generating wealth in local communities.⁵ While they are focused on providing different types of aid to countries in the developing world, Unilever identifies these partnerships as a way of building trust and exhibiting a genuine commitment to social responsibility with its key publics in the developed world. When discussing its vitality mission, Unilever USA looks to the company’s global commitments as a way of building trust with consumers whose purchasing behavior, shaped increasingly by issues of societal and environmental importance, demands companies to put more action behind their brands.⁶

Relationships: Unilever, Dove and Axe

Dove and Axe represent important brands in Unilever's home/personal care division (HPC), one of its two major product groups. Along with Lux, Pond's, Rexona and Sunsilk, they comprise the six global brands at the core of the company's business in the deodorants, skin cleansing, daily hair care and mass-market skin care categories.⁷ Additionally, of these six, all but Axe and Pond's are among the company's 12 €1+ billion brands.⁸

Dove

Unilever's Dove product line began in the United States in 1957 when the company launched a personal cleansing bar made from a pH-neutral cleanser and moisturizing component. Based on formula developed as a non-irritating skin cleanser for the treatment of burns and wounds during World War II, the introduction of the Dove Beauty Bar provided the first ever non-soap cleansing bar. Because it was not a soap, Unilever marketed Dove to women with the promise that it would not dry their skin. According to Dove, by the 1970s an independent clinical dermatological study recognized its Beauty Bar to be milder than 17 other leading bar soaps, and by the 1980s its Beauty Bar had become the number one physician-recommended cleansing bar.

While Dove's only product through 1995 was this cleansing bar, at this time the brand began launching more personal care products. Aimed at expanding its commitment to provide personal cleansing products less abrasive than soap, Dove's new products included a moisturizing body wash, sensitive skin bar, facial care cleanser, facial cleansing scrub and facial care daily moisturizer. Additionally, an all-day moisturizing body wash was introduced in 1999, followed by a line of anti-perspirants

and deodorants in 2001 and a hair-care line in 2003. Finally, in 2004, Dove launched its Campaign for Real Beauty in an effort to continue its mission of expanding the definition of beauty among women around the world.

Drawing from its roots as a brand that provides mild yet effective beauty products, Dove says it continues to provide products that make a “genuine difference to the condition and feel of your skin and hair.” Doing so helps to accomplish its mission of expanding women’s definition of beauty to include all ages, shapes and sizes, helping them to realize real beauty is not limited to how they look.⁹

Axe

Unlike Dove, Axe is a brand targeted to young men. First launched in France in 1983, the Axe brand was Unilever’s first substantial investment in a male product line. While other personal care companies had already introduced products for this audience, such as Estee Lauder’s Aramis, Shulton’s Old Spice, and Faberge’s Brut, Unilever had only begun to explore this market. By the 1970s, it sold various men’s toiletries with varying degrees of success in Britain, France and South Africa; however, in an effort to capture perceived growth in the demand for a male deodorant, the company decided to further develop these initial products with the Axe brand.¹⁰

Following its debut in France, by 1986 Axe was available in Germany and several other European countries and was marketed as Lynx in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand. As it moved into the 1990s, the brand widened its product offerings to include shaving and other male grooming products, eventually becoming the world’s largest male personal care brand with 7.5 percent of global deodorant sales. In addition to its product line, Axe’s geographic scope also continued to

grow. By the time it launched in the United States in 2002, it was present in 53 other countries and dominant in Europe, South America and Australia.¹¹

Regarding Axe's growth, Unilever credits the brand's "tightly focused promotional efforts—dramatizing 'Boy gets Girl' benefits resulting from product usage." Axe and its agencies have dramatized these benefits in several creative ways to reach the brand's 18 to 24 year old target audience, utilizing a variety of online promotions including websites, instant messaging, blogs and games.¹² The brand has also paired these online activities with edgy videos designed to elaborate on the "Boy gets Girl" theme. Often relying on both implicit and explicit sexual references, Axe continues to remind young men that using its products will help them receive attention from the girls in whom they are interested.

Unilever's Control over Both Brands

Even as separate brands targeting different groups in very different ways, Dove and Axe do not operate with complete independence from each other or their parent company. In fact, Unilever's corporate structure ensures its brands must operate under the overall control of the company because they are managed according to both product category and geographic regions. Structuring its operations in this manner helps Unilever manage its brands with two separate yet complimentary functions. On one hand, leaders in the product category function are responsible for brand development, innovation and research/development; their success is measured according to how they manage medium/long term market share, build brand health, develop measurement metrics and create greater value within the product category. On the other hand, leaders in the region function are responsible for deploying brands and innovations, managing the business and interfacing with customers. In doing this, they are held accountable for short-term

market share, growth, profit and cash flows. So, even though Unilever's brands are managed by individual teams, the management structure necessitates that these teams work within the overall direction of the company.¹³

Just as their overall management for each brand is not independent of Unilever's oversight, neither is the marketing function. According to a press release issued on April 12, 2007, Unilever asserts some level of control over the marketing functions for each of its brands in an effort to take seriously its marketing responsibilities. To do this, the company requires all marketing activities carried out by its brands adhere not only to the law, but also show respect to differing views and work not to offend. Additionally, it also has its own code of conduct with specific guidelines governing the use of advertising directed at small children and prohibiting the use of size-zero models.

Recognizing its portfolio includes diverse brands, in this release Unilever acknowledges that it speaks to different consumers in different ways but always in an effort to support its "vitality" mission. Doing so helps brands maintain relevance and uniqueness among target markets, providing consumers in each of them with the chance to "look good, feel good and get more out of life." Unilever even highlights the relationship between Dove and Axe as an example of how these inter-brand relationships work. Noting that although the tones of their respective campaigns are different, "both brands resist telling people how they should look and both aim to build people's confidence and self-esteem."¹⁴

Practically, this marketing structure dictates that while there are managers and teams who direct the marketing function for each brand, there are also leaders for this area at the product category and regional levels as well. For example, while Axe has a

team composed of positions such as brand manager and brand development director for deodorants, these positions also exist at the corporate level encompassing all brands in a product category, such as director of marketing, deodorant, for Unilever USA.¹⁵ Additionally, while different agencies are sometimes used to carry out advertising and public relations functions in marketing campaigns—i.e., Ogilvy and Mather handling Dove’s “Campaign for Real Beauty,” while Bartle Bogle Hegarty (BBH) handled Axe’s “Bom Chicka Wah Wah” campaign--sometimes the same agencies are used to handle multiple brands.¹⁶ Edelman handled PR for both the Dove and Axe campaigns mentioned above, while MindShare’s Chicago office contributed strategic marketing and media information for Axe, Degree and Dove.¹⁷ Finally, another example of Unilever’s efforts to expand continuity across marketing functions is its increasing effort to highlight the “Unilever” name in advertisements for individual brands. The company plans to put the Unilever logo on all of its packaging in an effort to emphasize its vitality mission and how its many products help consumers realize this mission in their lives.¹⁸

Dove and the Campaign for Real Beauty

Dove launched the “Campaign for Real Beauty” in September 2004 in response to the results of a study it commissioned, “The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report.” This report highlighted how 3,200 women from 10 countries feel about beauty and found only 2 percent describe themselves as “beautiful,” while 31 percent describe themselves as “natural,” 29 percent as “average,” 9 percent as “attractive,” 8 percent as “feminine,” 7 percent as “good-looking” and 7 percent as “cute.” Additionally, the study found 42 percent of women strongly agreed they felt uncomfortable describing themselves as beautiful and, while most women defined their beauty and attractiveness as

average, they felt their body weight was too high, a more common perception among older respondents.

In addition to its global report, Dove's "The Dove Report: Challenging Beauty" focused specifically on how women in the United States define beauty, noting most do not measure it solely according to the dimension of physical appearance; in fact, 36 percent of women felt their looks were above average, but only 18 percent rated their beauty the same way. Other statistics from the study provide greater insight into how women in the United States view beauty. Seventy-five percent feel beauty is defined more by qualities such as spirit and love of life than physical appearance, but 79 percent still wish a woman could be considered beautiful if she is not "physically perfect." Additionally, 71 percent expressed a desire for the media and advertising industry to expand their definition of beauty to include women of varying physical appearances.¹⁹

Overall, the study showed women feel their understanding of beauty is impacted heavily by societal influences, and it concludes: "[the] findings clearly indicate women are ready for a new definition of beauty that celebrates real types of women rather than stereotypes."²⁰ With the use of the report, Dove hopes to begin a process where "a new definition of beauty will free women from self-doubt and encourage them to embrace their real beauty," a revolution whose viability Dove finds affirmed in the results of the report.²¹

Based on the findings revealed in this research, Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty looks to extend Unilever's vitality mission by leading a change in the definition of beauty both in the United States and around the world. To do this, Dove began its campaign by

asking viewers to judge the appearance of models, whom it felt did not meet the stereotypical image of beauty, according to whether they were oversized, outstanding, wrinkled or wonderful. Next, in June 2005, Dove began the second phase of its campaign with ads featuring six women photographed in their underwear, though they were not professional models and their bodies differed in shape and size. Encouraging women to “Stand Firm to Celebrate Their Curves,” these ads worked to change the definition of beauty by addressing body image.²²

In addition to these print ads, Dove has also relied on discussions and fundraising to raise awareness of its Campaign. For example, to foster a greater connection among women from across the United States, Dove created opportunities on its website for them to comment about advertisements and discuss on bulletin boards different issues related to beauty. Additionally, Dove relied on panel events at the national and local levels, bringing together women from the American Women in Television and Radio to participate in the former and sponsoring local market panel events as part of the latter. Regarding fundraising, Dove created the Self-Esteem Fund to publicize the link between beauty and body-related self-esteem. Working through the Unilever Foundation, Dove uses money contributed to the Fund to support global projects that increase the self-esteem of girls and young women.²³

Dove has also relied on several emotionally compelling videos to spread the Campaign for Real Beauty’s message. In “Self-Esteem,” pictures of young girls flash across the screen with captions intended to insinuate how the current understanding of beauty might taint its perception among these young girls. For instance, a red-headed

girl's picture would appear with the phrase "Hates her freckles," while an Asian girl's picture was tagged with the phrase "Wishes she were blond."²⁴

Dove's "Evolution" video, which won both a Film Grand Prix and Cyber Lion (a Grand Prix for cyber-marketing) at the 2007 Cannes Lion International Advertising Festival, takes a different approach.²⁵ By highlighting the extent to which pictures of models are often modified and retouched in advertisements, this video points out the unrealistic nature of many models' appearances. Showing how much a model's appearance can change from its natural state at the beginning of a photo shoot, thanks to make-up, stylists and computers, "Evolution" is intended to challenge women not to accept a type of beauty that is unrealistic and attainable only through the use of editing and retouching.

Finally, "Onslaught" is another high-profile video from the Campaign released in October 2007. Opening with the image of a young girl crossing the street, it reveals a montage of images selected to depict the portrayal of beauty in pop culture. The first half of the images are advertisements depicting young and thin models in a variety of everyday places, while the second half show the plastic surgeries perhaps necessary to achieve the appearance of people in the first. The video then closes with another shot of the young girl and the line, "Talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does."

Axe and the "Bom Chicka Wah Wah" campaign

In February 2006, Axe executives met with BBH in London for a pitch concerning its newest campaign. Russell Taylor, vice-president of Axe, wanted a way to take his company's main sales idea, which insinuates that guys can become irresistible to

women by using Axe products, and translate it into a marketing message that would work in all of the 75 countries where Unilever sells Axe. In response, BBH proposed branding Axe products with the phrase “Bom Chicka Wah Wah,” a musical expression associated with 1970’s pornographic movies and understood currently as a slang term for a sexual encounter. Using this expression, BBH intended to create, according to *Business Week*, an “international expression of lust” that would help guys in each of Axe’s 75 countries understand the message behind the product.²⁶

In the United States, the “Bom Chicka Wah Wah” (BCWW) campaign uses television, online and live channels to disseminate its message. Five television commercials each provide a visual depiction of what supposedly happens when attractive women encounter the Axe scent. Each commercial features a young, attractive woman in a situation where she smells Axe on a man nearby, prompting her to blurt out the phrase “Bom Chicka Wah Wah” with a suggestive look on her face. For example, in one commercial a patient is attracted to the Axe fragrance worn by her dentist, while in another a grocery shopper is attracted to scent worn by a vegetable stock boy. The three additional commercials are set in a classroom, at a dinner party and in Paris.²⁷

Besides television, the BCWW campaign also utilizes online channels and face-to-face channels to disseminate its message. Beginning on May 1, 2007, the BCWW website, www.axebcww.com, began featuring a music video that stars four girls named Bom, Chicka, Wah and Wah, along with ringtones, copies of the television ads and other interactive activities.²⁸ The site’s homepage features a picture of the four thin, attractive girls from the music video, dressed in lingerie and sporting seductive looks, with the tagline “We’re the world’s naughtiest band.” On the “Meet the Band” page, another

picture of the girls appears with the following text: “We’re hell-bent on being the world’s hottest band. Listen to our tune of lust and take leave of our senses as we shed all our inhibitions.”

Also on the site, the “In Your Area” page shows a map supposedly depicting locales across the country where women have been effected by the Axe scents and offers videos of the BCWW girls driving in different places. Viewers are instructed to “Choose a hotspot on the map below and watch women across the country loose their inhibitions, their minds...and often their clothes.”²⁹ Finally, regarding its live messages, the BCWW campaign placed 60-foot inflatable cans with transparent bottoms in downtown Chicago, Los Angeles and Baltimore during its first week. The campaign then placed women, “Axe Angels,” inside the cans jumping on trampolines.³⁰

This campaign for Axe is not the first to rely on some type of sexual innuendo, as its advertising theme since its 2002 launch has been “giving guys the edge in the mating game.” When it launched in the United States at that time, it relied heavily on three online videos showing the “Axe effect,” which occurred when women smelled Axe’s scents and began chasing the men who wore them. Axe also created an online game where men could indicate the type of women in which they were most interested, allowing it to make predictions about which of its scents would be most attractive to them.³¹

Axe still relies heavily on the “Axe Effect” concept because it remains part of the address for the brand’s main website, www.theaxeeffect.com. This site contains info about Axe, its products and an archive of commercials all of which are described in a

sexual tone similar to the “Bom Chicka Wah Wah” site. For example, the site says the “Axe Effect” is an:

Internationally recognized name for the increased attention Axe-wearing males receive from eager, and attractive, female pursuers...Regardless of where you live, you can ‘get you some’ Axe effect by going to a store near you.

Also, when describing its product lines, the site shows pictures of attractive, young women with quotes that seem to indicate the result a man could expect from using the product. For its Clix scent, the tagline is “Clix...because the mating game is all about amazing figures. Spray on, sit back and count you clicks.” Also, the quote that appears under the picture of a smirking girl on the Clix page is, “I threw out those dirty magazines under you mattress...and got you new ones.” Axe uses similar text to describe the other eight fragrances on its site.³²

Viral Nature of Both Campaigns

Both Dove’s “Onslaught” and Axe’s “Bom Chicka Wah Wah” made the list of the top ten viral videos of 2007, ranked by YouTube impressions, according to GoViral, a viral marketing agency that seeds and tracks viral campaigns for creative agencies, media agencies and advertisers around the world.³³ While both brands clearly relied on viral marketing for their 2007 campaigns, neither are strangers to the viral marketing world.

Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty has utilized viral marketing in several ways since its 2004 launch. As previously mentioned, the Campaign’s website includes several different types of interactive features, each of which offer an “Invite a Friend” link at the

bottom of the page. Specifically, the section of the site devoted to “Self-Esteem Fund” offers opportunities for girls as well as moms and mentors to participate in online activities. The section designed for girls offers an interactive “Self-Esteem Zone,” which allows girls to measure and improve their self-image, post and respond to discussion boards and ask questions of an expert. The section designed for moms and mentors offers downloadable guides for developing self-esteem in different-aged girls, kits for holding a “Real Beauty” workshop and online training videos in building self-esteem. Both of these sections include a link entitled “Self-Esteem is Worth Sharing,” which allows the content to be emailed or provides a link for code to the website so that it can be embedded easily in other sites. Additionally, there is also a link to make a donation to the Self-Esteem fund, and the “Inside the Campaign” section of the sight allows visitors to send “Real Beauty” e-cards to help develop the self-esteem of others.³⁴

In addition to relying on viral marketing to popularize the interactive features of its site, Dove also relied heavily on it to spread the messages of its videos. The “Self-Esteem Fund” section of the Campaign for Real Beauty site also contains a film gallery of videos produced by the campaign, including “Onslaught,” “Evolution,” “Amy” and “Hair.” With each video, there is a link allowing the viewer to share the film, in addition to the “Invite a Friend” link visible on every page, and the films are also posted on YouTube.³⁵

Regarding their popularity, “Evolution” has been viewed on YouTube over 12 million times since its posting in Oct. 2006, and “Onslaught” was viewed more than 500,000 times in its first ten days, contributing to its over 1 million views by mid-December 2007. After its launch, “Evolution” garnered over 1.7 millions views in its

first month, making it the most viewed on YouTube for a day, week and month in October 2006; moreover, on Oct. 24, 2006, it was both ABC.com's lead story and CNN.com's most viewed story. Because of its popularity, the video enjoyed segments on ABC's "The View," "Good Morning America," "Ellen," NBC's "The Today's Show," CNN, "Entertainment Tonight" and Fox's "Geraldo." This media exposure, according to *Creativity*, provided \$150 million of free media time for Dove's Campaign.³⁶

Perhaps in response to the viral success of its campaign, Dove has also experienced a positive impact on its bottom line. Todd Tillemans, Unilever's VP for skin care, North America, notes that the Campaign for Real Beauty, assisted by the popularity of "Evolution," has increased substantially consumers' brand loyalty to the Dove name, evidenced in the number of brand sales generated by people buying more than one product. In Oct. 2006, these sales accounted for two-thirds of Dove's total sales, up from one-third before the Campaign for Real Beauty began three years earlier.³⁷

In addition to brand loyalty, Dove has benefited in other ways. At the end of 2006, Dove had gained market share in four of its five major product categories, including personal wash, hair care, deodorant and hand-body lotion.³⁸ Additionally, Dove sales increased 12.5 percent in 2005, the first year after the launch of the Campaign, and 10.1 percent in 2006. Sales for the 52 weeks leading up to August 2007, however, had risen only 1.2 percent, prompting *Advertising Age* to question whether the brand took its "Pro-Age" message too far, citing data showing Procter and Gamble's Olay "Anti-Aging" products outsold Dove's line of "Pro-Age" products eightfold in the first six months of 2007.³⁹

Axe has also relied heavily on the use of viral tactics for its success. When it posted online its three videos depicting the “Axe Effect,” discussed previously, men found them to be so humorous that millions forwarded them to friends via email.⁴⁰ Additionally, its “Naughty to Nice” and “Bom Chicka Wah Wah” campaigns both made their online activities easy to email to others and embed in websites, while the former even targeted 18 to 24 year old males on the Boost Hookst mobile network. When Axe released the main video for its “The Axe Vice Naughty to Nice Program,” it utilized a seven-week banner and video sharing campaign on this network, which consists of over four million young men, providing free clips for users to share with their friends. Sam Chadha, director of antiperspirants at Unilever, said the Hookst network was “a great fit for a campaign about lust” because its reputation among young mobile phone users is as a place to go for meeting girls.⁴¹ Even though these viral tactics may seem insignificant when viewed by themselves, *Business Week* attributes Axe’s effective use of viral marketing as a major reason why its U.S. business grew from nothing at its launch in 2002 to over \$500 million in 2006.⁴²

For both Dove and Axe, the use of viral techniques follows the lead of parent company Unilever. Following its 2001 partnership with Time Warner, which was the largest combined online and offline advertising deal ever, Unilever maintains it learned valuable lessons about how best to utilize the internet for advertising in the future; it maintains, however, that following the 2003 conclusion of this deal, they have planned no more large deals of this nature. Instead, Unilever’s marketers propose the most effective way the company can use the internet is to provide interesting, creative online content. Doing so, they hope, will build brand recognition by drawing visitors who would not

normally familiarize themselves with the websites of consumer products brands, especially not as they might with those brands offering big-ticket items.⁴³

The rationale behind this strategy is exemplified in Unilever's decision not to run a Super Bowl ad in 2007. While a consumer-generated ad for Dove's Oil Cream Body Wash did run during the Academy Awards and Degree, another Unilever brand, launched a webisode campaign in conjunction with the television show "24," the consumer involvement inherent in these placements indicate Unilever is relying on its brands to generate more of their own publicity. Unilever's shift in advertising strategy is also underscored by the online success of Dove's "Evolution," which garnered greater success than Dove's Super Bowl commercial the previous year, which relied mostly on press from before and after its single appearance to generate its impressions.⁴⁴

The Issue

On Oct. 9, 2007, following the release of Dove's "Onslaught" ad the previous week, the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC), a Boston-based activist group, issued a news release calling for a letter writing campaign to Unilever requesting it cease its Axe advertising. Citing "hypocrisy inherent in Unilever's marketing Dove products by promoting 'Real Beauty' for girls while simultaneously advertising Axe Body Spray by degrading them," the CCFC alleged it was unfair for Unilever to profit from the sexy tone and expression of its Axe ads while at the same time benefiting from the positive publicity garnered by Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty. Dr. Susan Linn, director and co-founder of the CCFC, said:

The Axe campaign makes clear that any concerns Unilever has about girls' well-being take a backseat to their desire to exploit stereotypes for profit. With Axe, Unilever is creating the same toxic environment addressed by its Dove Campaign.⁴⁵

Who is the CCFC?

The CCFC is headquartered in Boston at the Judge Baker Children's Center (JBCC), which is an affiliate of the Harvard University Medical School and exists to help children with mental health problems reach their full potential. Comprised of a national coalition of healthcare professionals, educators, concerned parents and advocacy groups, the CCFC works to expose and prevent the harmful effects of marketing directed at children. Essentially, it supports "the rights of children to grow up—and the rights of parents to raise them—without being undermined by rampant commercialism." To propagate this message, the Campaign utilizes both grassroots and congressional lobbying efforts, each aimed at further protecting children from marketers.⁴⁶

The Controversy Develops

Following the CCFC's release, comments on Unilever's connection with both the Dove and Axe campaigns appeared in blogs and traditional media alike. On Oct. 10, 2007, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article in its "Business" section, followed by *The New York Times* on Oct. 15, *The Toronto Star* on Nov. 28, and London's *The Times* on Dec. 3. Articles also appeared in trade publications, such as *Advertising Age*, *AdWeek.com* and *Campaign*, during the same period. Most of these articles simply presented facts surrounding the case, cited information from the CCFC's release and

provided comments from various Unilever employees about the company's opinion on the issue.

Several articles, however, commented on the ethics underlying Unilever's divergent messages, such as Michelle Gillet's Nov. 5 op-ed in *The Boston Globe*, entitled "A Company's Ugly Contradiction." She wrote:

Unilever is in the business of selling products, not values, and that means we, the consumers, are being manipulated, no matter how socially responsible an ad seems and how much we want to believe its message...If Unilever wants us to buy its concern for girls' self-esteem, it has to do more than shift the burden of its efforts to parents.⁴⁷

Additionally, Russell Davies, an author in *Campaign's* "Media Perspective" section, wrote concerning Unilever: "If you're going to claim big, meaningful values, you're going to have to live them, not just assert them."⁴⁸ Also, in its "Viewpoint" section, *Advertising Age* asserted:

Unilever and other large companies must realize that the days of the populace never making connections between brands with conflicting messages are gone...No amount of spin is going to erase the fact that Unilever is being hypocritical with its Dove work.⁴⁹

In addition to coverage from the traditional media, the new media have covered the Dove/Axe controversy as well. Technorati.com, a website devoted to searching and covering the blogosphere, identified just under 200 blogs that mentioned Dove, Axe and

“Onslaught” between the video’s Oct. 2007 debut and early Jan. 2008. Blogpulse.com, a division of Nielsen BuzzMetrics that analyzes content in the blogosphere, also shows approximately 10 bloggers had posted about the divergent themes of Unilever’s advertising before the CCFC issued its release on Oct. 9.

In addition to these blog posts, the controversy surrounding the release of “Onslaught” spawned a video parody of the ad that also enjoyed viral success. Rye Clifton, a senior strategic planner at the Interpublic Group of Companies’ Martin Agency, modified the “Onslaught” video to include women engaging in activities with a sexual connotation along with Axe’s logo instead of the montage of beauty industry messages present in the original video. At the end of his adaptation, Mr. Clifton added the line, “Talk to your daughter before Unilever does” as a parody of the original video’s charge for parents to talk to their daughters “before the beauty industry does.” Between the time Mr. Clifton posted the video on Oct. 19, 2007, and early Jan. 2008, it received over 92,000 views on YouTube and had generated over 100 blog postings by the end of November.⁵⁰

What Happens Next?

Even before the controversy surrounding Dove’s “Onslaught” video and its criticism of the beauty industry, Unilever maintained Dove and Axe were separate brands who targeted messages successfully to their respective audiences.⁵¹ And, after the controversy broke, Unilever has continued to maintain this position, noting in a statement that:

The Axe Campaign is a spoof of [the] ‘mating game’ and men’s desire to get noticed by women and not meant to be taken literally...Unilever is a large, global company with many brands in its portfolio. Each brand’s efforts are tailored to reflect the unique interests and needs of its audience.⁵²

Simon Clift, Unilever’s chief marketing officer, echoed this spoof idea when he said of the controversy: “The joke is on the boy. It’s just a few bloggers in the U.S. who don’t get it.” Clift also said Unilever had the right to use different imagery when targeting its Axe customers because: “[Teenage boys] are obsessed with sex. Nothing we or anybody else says will change that.”⁵³ Stacie Bright, senior communications marketing manager for Unilever, also commented on the matter. She noted most feedback concerning “Onslaught” had been positive and called the controversy “part of the conversation.”⁵⁴

Even taking Unilever’s position into consideration, questions of accountability for its messages still remain. Jim Nail, chief marketing and strategy officer for Cymfony, a brand-monitoring firm, pointed out this controversy exemplifies “the sort of distinction social media’s transparency renders difficult.”⁵⁵ As companies like Unilever continue to modify their communication practices, increasing their use of viral marketing tactics and their support of social responsibility issues, this case illustrates how they should also work to understand how these changes impact expectations among key publics.

Discussion Questions

1. How much does Unilever's commitment to social responsibility among all its brands impact any responsibility it has to ensure they do not use contradictory messages?
2. Could the brands be positioned in a way that still respects their target audiences while also respecting each other's ideals?
3. Does Unilever's corporate structure, which oversees the marketing activities of all brands and prohibits any one from operating with complete independence, make it more accountable for ensuring brand communications do not contradict?
4. Do Axe's marketing messages, in which young, thin, attractive girls find any man who wears an Axe scent to be sexually attractive, make those of the Campaign for Real Beauty seem less truthful?
5. To what extent should Axe's "Bom Chicka Wah Wah" campaign, along with its others marketing messages, just be considered spoofs of the male approach to dating? Should the CCFC's hypocritical assessment of Dove and Unilever be any different even if the ads are only intended as jokes? If so, how?
6. How, if at all, does the viral nature of both the Dove and Axe campaigns impact any responsibility Unilever has to ensure its communications messages are not contradictory?
7. Would the validity of the CCFC's hypocrisy claim be any different if both brands used either paid advertising spots or non-viral public relations tactics to send their messages?
8. To what extent should the CSR element of Dove's message, which relates directly to important issues of self-esteem and self-worth for women, influence any responsibility Unilever might have to ensure its other brands do not contradict these messages?

-
- ¹ From “Introducing Unilever” at www.unilever.com/ourcompany/aboutunilever on 12/21/2007 and “Introduction to Unilever,” Feb. 2007, a pdf downloaded from www.unilever.com on Dec. 21, 2007, pg. 5.
- ² Unilever, “Our mission,” retrieved Dec. 21, 2007 from www.unilever.com.
- ³ Fitzgerald, Niall. (2003, October). “CSR rebuilding trust in business: A perspective on corporate social responsibility in the 21st century.” Based on a speech presented at the London Business School. Retrieved Dec. 6, 2007, from www.unilever.com/ourcompany/newsandmedia/speeches/2003.
- ⁴ Cescau, Patrick. (2006, October). “Social innovation: How values-led brands are helping to drive business strategy.” A speech presented at the “Business as an agent of world benefit: A global forum,” Cleveland, OH. Retrieved Dec. 6, 2007, from www.unilever.com/ourcompany/newsandmedia/speeches/2006.
- ⁵ Unilever. “Strategy and Management.” Retrieved Dec. 22, 2007, from www.unilever.com/ourvalues.
- ⁶ Unilever. “Our vitality.” Retrieved Dec. 22, 2007, from www.unilever.com/ourcompany/aboutunilever.
- ⁷ Unilever. “2006 Annual Report.” Retrieved Dec. 22, 2007, from www.unilever.com/ourcompany/investorcentre/annual_reports.
- ⁸ Unilever. (Feb. 2007). “Introduction to Unilever.” Retrieved Dec. 22, 2007, from www.unilever.com/ourcompany/aboutunilever/introducingunilever/default.asp.
- ⁹ Dove. “Frequently asked questions.” Retrieved Dec. 23, 2007, from <http://www.unilever.com.lk/ourbrands/personalcare/dove.asp>.
- ¹⁰ Jones, Geoffery. (2005). *Renewing Unilever: Transformation and tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pg. 727.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 728.
- ¹² The International Advertising Association. (2007). “Contextual Background” in the “Interad XII Global Student Competition Case Brief.” Retrieved Dec. 23, 2007, from <http://www.iaaglobal.org/file.ashx?fid=08eff0a5-b79e-4e09-9824-4b3948190f63>.
- ¹³ Unilever. (Feb. 2007). “Introduction to Unilever.” pg. 10.
- ¹⁴ Unilever. (April 12, 2007). “Unilever takes its marketing responsibility very seriously.” Press Release. Retrieved Dec. 23, 2007, from www.unilever.com/ourcompany/newsandmedia/pressreleases.
- ¹⁵ Petrecca, Laura. (April 17, 2007). “Axe ads turn up the promise of sex appeal: Big dollars in youthful scents.” *USA Today*, “Money,” pg. 3B. Brunelli, Richard. (Nov. 12, 2007). “Rising star.” *Adweek.com*. Retrieved Dec. 23, 2007, from http://www.adweek.com/aw/search/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1003670987.
- ¹⁶ Press release from Ogilvy and Mather, Canada and Hamm, S. (July 2, 2007). “Children of the web: How the second-generation Internet is spawning a global youth culture—and what businesses can do to cash in on it.” *Business Week*.
- ¹⁷ Brunelli, Richard. “Rising Star.” Nov. 12, 2007.
- ¹⁸ Unilever. “Discover Unilever.” pg. 16. Retrieved Dec. 22, 2007, from www.unilever.com/ourcompany/aboutunilever/introducingunilever/discoverunilever.asp?linkid=navigation.
- ¹⁹ Dove. (2004). “The Dove Report: Challenging Beauty.” Pg. 6. Retrieved Dec. 27, 2007, at http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/uploadedFiles/challenging_beauty.pdf.

-
- ²⁰ Ibid., 9.
- ²¹ Ibid., 2.
- ²² “The Campaign for Real Beauty Background,” retrieved Dec. 27, 2007, from www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/press.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Keneally, Scott. (May 2006). “I cry so much my girlfriend thinks I’m pathetic.” *Jane Magazine*. Retrieved online at www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/press on January 3, 2007.
- ²⁵ Mascoll, Philip. (June 25, 2007). “Top prize for ad that sells no product.” *The Toronto Star*, pg. A17.
- ²⁶ Hamm, Steve. (July 2, 2007). “Children of the web: How the second-generation Internet is spawning a global youth culture—and what business can do to cash in,” *Business Week*, pg 50.
- ²⁷ www.axebcww.com
- ²⁸ Petrecca, Laura. “Axe ads turn up the promise of sex appeal.” April 17, 2007.
- ²⁹ www.axebcww.com
- ³⁰ Petrecca, Laura, “Axe ads turn up the promise of sex appeal,” April 17, 2007.
- ³¹ Hamm, Steve, “Children of the Web,” July 2, 2007.
- ³² www.theaxeeffect.com
- ³³ “Top 10 Virals.” (Dec. 14, 2007). *Campaign*, “Campaign Annual 2007,” pg. 38, and www.goviral.com, retrieved Dec. 22, 2007.
- ³⁴ www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/dsef07
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ “Grand Prize Winner: Dove ‘Evolution.’” (May 1, 2007). *Creativity*, “Special Report: Creativity Awards,” pg. 46.
- ³⁷ Neff, Jack. (Oct. 30, 2006). “A real beauty: Dove’s viral makes big splash for no cash.” *Advertising Age*, “News,” pg 1.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Neff, Jack. (Sept. 24, 2007). “Soft Soap; In its Campaign for Real Beauty, Dove tells women that they are beautiful as they are. But the push is showing signs of aging.” *Advertising Age*, “News,” pg. 1.
- ⁴⁰ Hamm, Steve, “Children of the Web,” July 2, 2007.
- ⁴¹ Voight, Joan. (Oct. 15, 2007). “Axe Follows Guys Into Mobile Chat Rooms,” *Brandweek.com*. Retrieved Dec. 22, 2007, from www.brandweek.com.
- ⁴² Hamm, Steve, “Children of the Web,” July 2, 2007.
- ⁴³ Unilever’s company profile, retrieved from jobs.nytimes.com on Dec. 24, 2007.
- ⁴⁴ Neff, Jack. (Jan. 29, 2007). “P&G, Unilever sit out Super Bowl; Package-goods giants avoid clutter of big day, learn to build own buzz.” *Advertising Age*, “News,” pg. 1.
- ⁴⁵ Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood (CCFC). (Oct. 9, 2007). “CCFC to Unilever: Ax the Axe campaign if you care about real beauty.” Press Release. Retrieved Dec. 4, 2007, from www.commercialexploitation.org/newsroom.htm.
- ⁴⁶ CCFC. “About us.” Retrieved on Jan. 3, 2007, from www.commercialexploitation.org/aboutus.
- ⁴⁷ Gillett, Michelle. (Nov. 5, 2007). “A company’s ugly contradiction.” *The Boston Globe*, “Op-Ed.,” pg. A15.

⁴⁸ Davies, Russell. (Oct. 19, 2007). "Brand values must mean something to win over customer." *Campaign*, pg. 17.

⁴⁹ *Advertising Age*. (Dec. 3, 2007). "Consumers will connect the dots between brands." *Advertising Age*, "Viewpoint," pg. 16.

⁵⁰ Neff, Jack. (Nov. 26, 2007). "An onslaught against 'Onslaught': Dove viral draws heat from critics." *Advertising Age*, "News," pg. 3.

⁵¹ Unilever. "Unilever takes marketing responsibility very seriously." April 12, 2007.

⁵² Neff, Jack. "An onslaught against 'Onslaught': Dove viral draws heat from critics." Nov. 26, 2007.

⁵³ Mortished, Carl. (Dec. 3, 2007). "Internet guerilla attack exposes Unilever 'hypocrisy' of Dove girls and dirty dancers." *The Times* (London), "Business," pg. 42.

⁵⁴ Neff, Jack. "An onslaught against 'Onslaught': Dove viral draws heat from critics." Nov. 26, 2007.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*