

Dove and Axe: Examples of Hypocrisy or Good Marketing?

Teaching Note

Overview

The Dove/Axe case provides an opportunity to discuss the ethical considerations surrounding one company, Unilever, whose brands send out messages in their marketing communications that are very different, and some would say contradictory. While the company maintains this is just an example of how different brands in the same company can target different audiences, some activists, journalists and bloggers have expressed concern.

With the frequency of acquisitions in today's business environment creating larger corporate conglomerates, the need for communications practitioners to manage messages within a corporation and across its geographic regions is becoming increasingly complex. While Unilever is a large company whose portfolio includes over 400 brands, does its size make it acceptable for its brands to hold different stances on important issues?

This issue is complicated further both by the use of viral marketing techniques and the recent focus placed on corporate social responsibility (CSR). As businesses rely increasingly on consumers to spread marketing messages through viral campaigns, hopefully leading to higher profits, consumers may expect a greater level of transparency and accountability for their emerging role in the sales process. Also, as companies begin to look for ways to participate in CSR initiatives, they must decide what level of commitment they are willing to make for a cause, weighing whether they are willing to endure scrutiny for their practices that might be in opposition to their CSR issue. Since Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty attempts to improve women's assessment of their beauty, which is a likely an important personal issue tied closely to self-esteem, this questions is of particular interest in this case.

Given these trends, the Dove/Axe case opens a door for classroom discussion that can better prepare students to better address ethical dilemmas in the real world. When working through the case, students should be challenged not just to address the questions presented, but also to think about how they would handle other ethical concerns that could emerge during their careers.

Purposes of the Case Study

1. To help students recognize the extent to which different publics can receive messages in different ways.
2. To discuss whether a company has an ethical responsibility to ensure its brands do not promote contradictory messages in their marketing communications.

3. To question whether a company's use of viral marketing tactics demands a higher level of accountability to the consumer for the messages distributed therein.
4. To examine the extent to which a company is accountable for its stance on CSR issues across brands and whether the nature of these issues impacts the level of accountability.

Teaching Components

Before discussing the case, professors should direct students to read the case study on their own. When making the reading assignment, they should also ensure students have an adequate understanding of essential terms like CSR and viral marketing.

During the class period, professors should begin by using the Powerpoint presentation to review important aspects of the case, including learning objectives, central issues, and key facts. Then, depending on class size, the professor could continue with group discussion in one of the following ways:

1. Professors could divide the class into groups, assigning each group one or more of the discussion questions. After providing several minutes for the groups to discuss their responses, they would each present their answers to each other. In this situation, each group would be responsible for:
 - Answering its questions.
 - Providing supporting information for its answer from the text of the case.
 - Fielding questions from other groups.
 - Applying the Page Principles it finds relevant to its questions.
2. Professors could ask the class to identify key publics from the case, which might include young girls and mothers targeted by the Campaign for Real Beauty, young men targeted by Axe or activists who take issue with Unilever's communications. The professor could then divide the class into groups according to the number of key publics they identified. In this scenario, each group would answer all of the discussion questions from the perspective of its public, illustrating the extent to which key publics may interpret the same message differently. Each group would be responsible for:
 - Answering its questions.
 - Providing supporting information for its answer from the text of the case.
 - Explaining the rationale behind its public's understanding of the Dove and Axe campaigns and fielding questions from the other groups.
 - Applying the Page Principles it finds relevant to its questions.

Key Communication Issue

Following the early October release of “Onslaught,” a viral video in Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty,” the Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood (CCFC) issued a press release on Oct. 9, 2007, calling for a letter writing campaign to Unilever. The CCFC demanded the company cease advertising and marketing communications for Axe, finding both conflict and hypocrisy in the messages sent by it and Dove. In its release, the CCFC explained that Axe’s portrayal of women as young, thin and often suggestively dressed, along with its use of text and slogans utilizing sexual innuendo, made Dove’s real beauty message seem untrue. As a result, the CCFC accused Unilever of using Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty only as a way to raise profits, saying if it was truly concerned about real beauty, and how it can encompass women of all shapes and sizes, then it would not allow Axe’s messages to portray women as they currently do.

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?

Important Information for Questions 1 & 2:

- Unilever identifies social responsibility as a quality it strives to ensure is inherent in everything it does.
 - The company’s leadership finds creating social benefits to be paramount in its understanding of what is involved in business.
 - It holds trust and reputation as two central reasons to participate in corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects.
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?

Important Information for Question 3:

- Unilever takes its marketing responsibility very seriously and enforces certain guidelines on all its brands, such as respecting different views and taking care not to offend.

- Brands are managed by individual teams and by corporate executives (by region and product category), each of who are accountable for different actions and evaluated in different ways.
- Unilever points to Dove and Axe in company publications as examples of how two brands can reach two different groups, broadening the reach of its mission “to add vitality to life.”

Page Principle for Questions 1, 2 & 3:

Conduct public relations as if the whole company depends on it.

As public relations is a management function, a company should ensure all of its operations work together to support each other. In Unilever’s case, students should address to what extent, if any, the different messages sent by Dove and Axe are inherently contradictory. Moreover, they should discuss how Unilever could position both brands in a way that reaches their respective targets while still respecting each other’s ideals.

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?

Important Points for Questions 4 & 5:

- The Campaign for Real Beauty is based on national and international research indicating women are hesitant to own the term “beautiful,” even more so than the concept of physical attractiveness.
- The premise for Dove’s campaign is tied closely to the emotional wellbeing of women by improving their self-esteem.
- Axe’s “Bom Chicka Wah Wah” campaign is targeted to 18 to 24 year old men and would likely seem humorous to this age group.
- Axe’s advertising focuses on physical attraction, with its Clix line even espousing the importance of a good figure.

Page Principles for Questions 4 & 5:

To tell the truth.

These questions should address whether the credibility of Dove's message is diminished by the tone of Axe's. Students should look at whether there is room for Axe to joke about how women respond to men if Dove's message about real beauty is true. If beauty really does come in all shapes and sizes, and contain components besides physical appearance, is it fair for Unilever, through Axe, to send the message that guys are interested in girls who are thin, physically attractive and who act suggestively?

Prove it with action.

Students should discuss whether it's appropriate for Axe to even make jokes in such a way that might undermine Dove's message. Dove has clearly worked to act on its message through its Self-Esteem fund, which has raised money and provided self-esteem building materials at the national and international level. However, is this work undercut in any way by the apparent objectification of women in Axe's messages?

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?

Important Information for Questions 6, 7 & 8:

- Unilever appears to have re-directed its marketing focus to rely more on viral, consumer-generated publicity following the conclusion of its Time Warner deal in 2003.
- The viral components of Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty were designed to address needs highlighted in Dove's research, which dealt with important issues of self-esteem and self-worth for women.

- The attention generated virally by Dove’s “Evolution” provided the brand with an estimated \$150 million in free publicity.
- Axe’s heavy use of viral tactics may have helped boost its brand value in the United States from \$0 to over \$500 million since its 2002 launch.

Page Principles for Questions 6, 7 & 8:

Listen to the customer.

In creating the content of its Campaign for Real Beauty, Dove conducted extensive research, both in the United States and around the world, to understand how women feel about beauty. The findings from these studies then shaped how Dove positioned itself as a brand and the viral tactics used to convey its message (e.g. the self-esteem tools developed for the Campaign’s website, the Self-Esteem fund, etc.). As a result, Dove appears to have done an excellent job at listening to how its customers feel about beauty and working to address their concerns, even providing them with online materials they can share easily with their friends. However, little or no public information exists about the research supporting Axe’s campaign. Students should address whether Axe’s use of a different message represents what is actually an inattentive ear on behalf of Unilever. They should also consider whether Axe could have benefited from researching how its customers view women before developing its campaign.

Manage for tomorrow.

Given that Dove’s viral messages generated a vast amount of free publicity for its brand and centered on very important social issues for women, students should discuss whether Unilever could have expected a negative response from its publics when they became aware of its connection with both Dove and Axe. If so, students could also discuss how Unilever might have prevented this difficult situation and what it could do differently to better “Manage for tomorrow.”

Key Points

- Audiences receive messages in different, sometimes unexpected ways.
- Messages of social responsibility can increase an audience’s expectation of corporate accountability
- Viral tactics can spread both positive and negative publicity, sometimes requiring companies to address the validity of viral criticisms and how to shape their response.