CONSUMER REACTANCE:

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CONSUMERS

RESPOND NEGATIVELY

By

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ABSTRACT

Around the turn of the century marketing underwent a significant change. What was previously a marketer controlled, outbound marketing environment turned into a consumer-controlled environment. Traditional marketing tactics had become less effective and marketers shifted their efforts to increase consumer word-of-mouth and engagement. Even though positive online engagement can boost a brand, giving consumers the freedom to interact and create content can be very dangerous. When consumers feel like they are being marketed to too much, they often take to digital platforms to voice their complaints. Psychological reactance was a term coined by Jack Brehm in the 1960's who explained that when someone feels that one of their behavioral freedoms is being threatened, they will respond by enacting that freedom. For many consumers the overflow of marketing made them feel as though their freedom of choice was being infringed upon, and they would respond by lashing out against the company. Consumer reactance can take many forms from simply not buying a product to spreading negative word-of-mouth to verbally attacking the company. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate consumer reactance, develop hypotheses for future testing, and discuss the implications of the phenomenon.

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INTRODUCTION

Psychological reactance is a phenomenon that was first defined in the 1960's by Jack Brehm. In his words, reactance happens when "people become motivationally aroused by a threat to or elimination of a behavioral freedom" (Brehm 1989). In other words, reactance occurs when a person perceives a freedom or right being infringed upon and they respond by acting out within that right. A good example of this occurred when I was a young boy and playing in my grandmother's garage. She told me not to open the garage door under any circumstance. I felt that she was threatening my freedom to choose whether I opened the garage door or not. And so, of course I opened it and was punished accordingly. The idea of consumer reactance works in a similar way, but under a different context.

Since the advent of the Internet and social media, companies have increasingly focused on engaging and interacting with consumers. Marketers are more focused on pulling the customers in, instead of pushing a message on them. In most circumstances consumers either behave in the way that the company hoped or they ignore the promotional efforts. However, occasionally consumers will react negatively to marketing.

When a consumer feels berated with advertising, coupons, or any form of marketing, they get overwhelmed. They feel as though their freedom to choose whether they make a purchase is being threatened. And as with me in my grandmother's garage, consumers will in one way or another enact their behavioral freedom of choice. How they react and to what extent it affects the company is not always the same. Some may react by not purchasing, others may tell their friends that the product is terrible, and some may

respond by directly attacking the company. There are many different kinds of reactance and they all have the potential to affect the company differently.

Upon researching this phenomenon I have found that there is very little literature available that discusses reactance on any level. There is some discussion about the implications and possibility of reactance, but very little that delves deep into the different ways people react. Surely, some reactance is on a large enough scale that is broadcasted through the media, but others may be very small. The purpose of this research paper is to analyze where reactance fits into the current marketing environment, what it looks like when it occurs, and how it affects companies.

In the next paragraphs, the literature review will begin by briefly discussing how marketing went from one-way, outbound to consumer controlled. It will then outline why marketers and consumers like engagement, the kinds of engagement, and the threats to engagement. Finally, the literature review will approach why consumers react in the first place.

After the discussion of the current literature, I will conduct an exploratory research of secondary sources using a simple pattern matching method. The method will allow me to see reoccurring elements in each of the cases and then discuss the significance of these factors. At the end of the discussion I will present common patterns and hypotheses for future testing. Then I will discuss the limitations of the data and method.

Data from the exploratory research will also point to implications to marketers. These include the need to assess the risk before creating a promotional campaign, the importance of contingency plans, and what to do when reactance occurs. The best

defense to reactance is avoiding it all together, which can happen if marketers are able to think about how the consumer sees the world.

Finally, I will conclude by summarizing the document and my findings. However, before implications, hypotheses, discussion, and research can make any sense, it is important to know the historical and current environment in which reactance exists.

<u>LITERATURE REVIEW</u>

In the early stages of advertising, ads were placed in magazines, on buildings and on billboards with a picture and a standard message to all of the consumers. As the years progressed both marketers and consumers changed. What was once mass marketing in the United States turned into a global, segmented, and increasingly customized marketing mix that focuses on building relationships with consumers in new and unique ways (Constantinides, 2006). At the turn of the century marketers were still relatively in control of their media outlets, but the attitudes of consumers began to forever change in 1999 with the advent of technologies that shifted control toward consumers (e.g.,TiVo).

The Consumer Control Revolution

Traditionally, the only real control that consumers had over their television was whether or not they would change a channel or station when an advertisement came on. Beyond that marketers had all of the power. However, TiVo gave the population something over which marketers everywhere lost sleep: choice (Zeisser, 2002). TiVo is a digital video recording system that allows customers to record shows, fast forward through them, or rewind them just like they might with a movie that they own. Before TiVo arrived to the market companies used mass traditional media outlets such as TV, the radio, outdoor media, and later online advertising. TiVo itself did not put an end to

traditional mass media; rather, it was a part of an already emerging trend of consumer control. The trend would ultimately put an end to traditional mass marketing and require an intensely personalized marketing strategy.

TiVo was one of the first big steps toward the engagement marketing that we see today. Products like Netflix, Hulu, and Internet Ad Blockers all operate under the same principle as TiVo, which is that consumers should be able to control what they see and hear, and that content should not be forced upon them. Once people began to get a taste of the freedom to choose there was no going back to a traditional, promotional mix: it gave the power to the people instead of to the corporation (Zeisser, 2002). Consumers forced marketers to create highly customized and segmented campaigns that would draw in potential buyers. For the first time in marketing history, advertisements were not about the message the company wanted to send, they were about the message to which customers were willing to listen.

Why Marketers Want Engagement

With the advent of social media, consumers began demanding even more control of their lives. Studies and surveys have shown that traditional marketing communications have begun losing effectiveness and that consumer attitudes toward traditional media have decreased (Trusov, Bucklin, and Pauwels, 2009). Starting in the early 2000s consumers were less and less interested in the outdated advertising styles, which forced marketers to find a different way to get to their customers. The outlet of choice was word-of-mouth (WOM) and the emergence of social media created the perfect avenue for WOM to spread. Joe Tripoli, the CMO at Coca-Cola emphasizes "expressions" in addition to "impressions". Expressions, he explains, occur when a consumer interacts

with content while impressions are simply exposure to the message (Keller and Fay, 2012). Engagement does not only relate to interaction between a company and a consumer, it can also mean interaction between two consumers. An example of such engagement can be found in WOM. Keller and Fay (2012) found that over half of consumers agree that they consider information spread in WOM conversations credible. Other studies have concluded that what consumers' peers say does in fact affect purchase probability both positively and negatively (Vázquez-Casielles, Suárez-Álvarez, del Río-Lanza, 2013). On top of the benefits of attracting consumers, customers that are attracted through WOM will add twice as much long-term value to the firm (Villanueva, Shijin, Dominique, 2008). This means that marketers that use WOM can build credibility, purchase potential, and long-term customers, making it a far more attractive option than traditional media.

An additional benefit of WOM is that smaller businesses were able to afford online marketing tactics when they were previously not able to pay for traditional media. This made the online marketing scene far more attractive. Moreover, companies found that a significant percentage of new customers were largely due to referrals from WOM; which meant that not only was it less expensive, but it is also more effective (Winterberg, 2013). Marketers began to realize that there was a lot of money to be made if they could get consumers to interact, which triggered the revolution of consumer engagement marketing.

Why Consumers Engage

At this point it is easy to understand that marketers want consumers to engage because it creates word-of-mouth, which is a cheaper and more effective way to attract

long-term customers. However what is it that makes consumers want to engage? Well, if

marketers are doing their job then they are providing some kind of added value to the

consumer when he or she interacts with the brand. It may be information or a discount or

even an emotional connection with the company. Often times they engage for a more

personal reason. Product consumption creates value to consumers, and so they might

interact because they want to construct a more personal experience with the company

(Gambetti and Graffigna, 2010). Alternatively, consumers may engage because they want

to feel a sense of community with the other people who have purchased the company's

product (Pagani and Mirabello, 2011). In any case, it is clear that when consumers choose

to have a relationship with a brand, they are doing so out of personal interest.

Kinds of Engagement

Though WOM is typically accomplished in person or over the phone, customers

are now taking to social media to express their feelings about a product or company.

There are three kinds of consumer interactions online (Corstjens and Umblijs, 2012):

Type 1: induced and encouraged—but not paid for—by brand owners

Type 2: produced by consumers for brand owner at the brand owner's request

Type 3: generated by consumers or communities that are neither paid for nor

induced by brand owners.

The third type is the most critical because it can either help or hurt the brand the

most. In the first two categories the company is heavily involved in the interaction, but in

the third circumstance the brand has no idea or control of what a consumer posts. Though

this makes the commentary more authentic, the danger lies in the fact that consumers do

not always post a positive message. The consumers that choose to connect on social

media are often like-minded. So, if one of them says something bad about a company, his connections are more likely to either adopt the same negative attitude or remember the post when conducting their own information search ("Communicators are out of sync," 2008). With that being said, it is important to mention that consumers can say whatever they want about any aspect of the company, even if it is not true.

Threats to Engagement

There is an age-old saying that all press is good press, and if it were true then even negative online feedback would be helpful for a brand. However, studies have shown that negative press on social media is far more harmful than positive press is beneficial (Corstjens and Umblijs, 2012). This is why marketers have to keep an eye out for negative feedback, because there is no telling how much damage even the smallest comment can do.

There are many reasons why consumers may give negative feedback to or about the company. The product, purchase experience, or price could have been bad, just to name a few examples. However, when it comes to promotion, part of the issue is consumer control. Due to the abundance of advertisements to which consumers are exposed every day and the ever-changing media world; they are getting better at tuning out brand communications (Havlena, Cardarelli, and De Montigny, 2007). This has challenged marketers to find and implement new and creative ways to reach their audience. As marketers develop more innovative and intrusive ways to reach their target, consumers begin to get frustrated by their lack of control.

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of when they are being marketed to. This is partly because their ability to govern their environment makes them more aware

of the things that they want to control. They are especially aware when they do not like the advertising they see. Consumers will not respond well to an advertisement if they do not trust what is being said, if they are annoyed by the content of the ad, if they are insulted by the promotion, or if they are annoyed by when they are exposed to the ad (Haller 1974). When consumers do not have control over what they see, they are more likely to negatively respond to the company.

Psychological Reactance

When consumers lash out against a company because of lack of control, it is called consumer reactance. This phenomenon developed from the original idea of psychological reactance, which was defined in the 1960's by Jack Brehm. He said, "people become motivationally aroused by a threat to or elimination of a behavioral freedom" (Brehm 1989). In other words, when someone feels one of his rights or freedoms being threatened, he responds by exercising that right or freedom (Zemack-Rugar, Fitzsimons, and Lehmann, 2007).

The idea is actually pretty simple to comprehend. For example, imagine two young brothers are fighting over a toy truck. The elder one says that the truck is his, but the younger one is still trying to grab it. All of a sudden, their mother yells at the older one to let go, but instead he takes the truck and smashes it against the ground. This is reactance. In the older boy's eyes, his "right" or "freedom" was the ownership of the truck and the choice to decide what happened to it. When his mother and his brother infringed upon that right by taking the truck away, he enacted his freedom of ownership by choosing to destroy it.

There are two elements required for an action to be considered reactance. The first

element is that there has to be an expectation of free choice. Someone in prison does not expect to have the freedom to choose whether he eats steak every night, so any outburst he has about that possibility would not be considered reactance. Secondly, that freedom must be threatened (Clee and Wicklund 1980). When the freedom is threatened or taken away, something else happens; the consumer finds the freedom more attractive and wants it more (Brehm 1989). A very important point to make in regards to psychological reactance is that the freedom in question does not have to be real; it is a behavioral freedom, so it just has to be expected. Say the truck that the young boys were arguing over did not actually belong to the older brother; instead it actually belonged to their cousin. This is still considered reactance because the older brother expected the freedom to decide the fate of the truck, even though it was not his.

One more important detail about reactance is that it comes in multiple forms: impersonal and interpersonal (Clee and Wicklund 1980). Impersonal threats to freedom are more like barriers to action. If a product is sold out, then a person's expected freedom to buy that product has been threatened because he no longer can buy the product. If a customer was deciding between two shirts, but saw another customer contemplating one of them, the first customer might buy it so that his freedom to purchase that shirt is not threatened. That being said, whenever a consumer purchases one product instead of another, he is imposing an impersonal threat on himself by taking away his freedom to purchase the other. Interpersonal threats to freedom are exemplified by the story of the two brothers. One brother felt his freedom was being infringed upon, which provoked him to exercise his right to choose what happened to the truck. Though both kinds of reactance are important, this thesis will focus only on interpersonal reactance.

Brehm also explains that threatening a freedom can imply two things: first is that similar freedoms will also be threatened and the second is that threat today will apply to the freedom in the future (Brehm 1989). When there are more freedoms that are threatened there is higher the chance of reactance.

Consumer Reactance

Psychological reactance and consumer reactance share the same principles, but consumer reactance specifically refers to the relationship between a consumer and a company (Zemack-Rugar, Fitzsimons, and Lehmann, 2007). Consumers have certain expectations because of this consumer-controlled environment that play a role their relationships with companies. For example, consumers may believe that they have the right to privacy, to control their environment, to not see something, to not hear something, to not smell something, to not have to sit through an advertisement, to not be annoyed by an ad campaign or marketing strategy, or any other number of expectations. For some of these, consumers do have legal rights, for others there is a social expectation, but for others it is just a consumer's preference. The best way to summarize the freedom that consumers feel is the freedom of choice (Brehm 1989). When a consumer believes a company is threatening his freedom to choose, they are more likely to react. This can be in the form of no longer selling a product or trying to influence the consumer to make a particular purchase.

The threshold for infringement and how consumers respond varies from day to day, consumer to consumer, and company to company. On some days someone may really disdain one particular ad and choose to react in a way that they may not on any other day. The issue of course is what happens when a consumer does choose to respond.

Marketers tend to refer to positive interaction, that which develops loyalty, commitment, trust and involvement, as "engagement" (Bowden, 2009). This kind of interaction will in its nature boost the brand. Therefore, positive engagement is not much of a concern when it comes to damage control. The danger lies when a consumer reacts and because of the viral nature of media, any negativity can lead to a worldwide change in the perception of a brand. That is one reason why customer feedback on companies can be so dangerous, because customers will make purchase decisions based on the reviews of fellow shoppers (Lin, Shin, and Ling, 2010). If there is enough negative feedback, the company could lose sales. A perfect example of this occurred in 1999 when the company AgriBioTech, Inc. was the target of an anonymous online posting stating that the organization was going bankrupt. In reality, the company was in very good financial standings, but after the post their stock dropped from $29.50 to $9.75 (Ray, 2003). Any sort of negativity can change how consumers view a brand and it is important for marketers to realize this. In reality, we do not know why someone chose to defame AgriBioTech, only that it happened and the results were devastating. It could have been an angry employee, a disgruntled customer, or even just a prank, but targeting and eliminating someone's potential anger towards a company can be the difference between success and bankruptcy.

Consumer Reactance in Today's Marketplace

In the past companies had the majority of control over the marketing environment, but that is not the case anymore. With a greater focus on consumer control, marketers have tried to find ways to increase word-of-mouth through engagement and relationship building. Ideally for companies, relationships would always be positive; however, that is not always the case. Although there are plenty of examples of reactance

before the advent of the Internet, social media has allowed consumers to communicate with the company and other consumers openly and quickly. There is very little literature to date explaining what happens when consumer reactance occurs, and how companies should respond. The focus of this research is to explore secondary data sources in order to better understand why consumers react, how companies respond, and the best way to avoid reactance altogether.

<center>METHODS & RESULTS</center>

The method used in this study is simple pattern matching in secondary sources. Simple pattern matching is a form of exploratory research, which is a preliminary step in the development of an understanding of a relatively new field of study (Exploratory Case Study). The point of exploratory research is to develop research questions and hypotheses that can be tested in the future.

The reason I am searching secondary sources is that they give a good depiction of both current and historical reactance. Primary research requires a hypothesis, and because this is a fairly unexplored phenomenon, research questions have yet to be developed. Simple pattern matching is the best method to use for this kind of research because it exposes trends within the cases. Pattern matching is when the researcher explores multiple cases and notes similarities, or patterns, between them. Once he sees trends he can develop clear and well-educated hypotheses about the subject matter.

The six cases discussed have been selected based on several criteria. First of all, they are all well documented and sufficient information can be obtained through their analysis. Secondly, in every case the consumers directly attack the brand or product. Finally, in each case there is communicable result from the consumer reactance. No two

cases are the same, but there are two cases that revolve around the introduction of a new product, two involving online sweepstakes, and two that took place on social media.

Each case has an important pattern already in play. In every case there is one specific marketing stunt that set off the reactance. This means that the company actually did something to make consumers upset, it is not that consumers did not previously like the organization. Also, the consumer specifically targets the company because of the promotion. In other words, the company did something to make a consumers feel as though their freedoms were being threatened, which triggered the response. In this way the respondents are their own control group because had it not been for the event, they would not have reacted. A third part of the pattern is that the consumer response was not what the marketers or companies were hoping for; this makes it reactance, not engagement. Finally, the company was in some way affected by the interaction.

New Coke – A Classic of Consumer Reactance

The New Coke case is different from other cases presented here because it does not involve the use of the Internet; however, it is an important case for several reasons. First off, it is a reminder that not all reactance occurs online, in fact a lot occurs offline. Secondly, it proves that consumer reactance has been a around for a long time, it is not a new phenomenon. Finally, in this case we can most directly see the effects of reactance.

In 1985 the Coca-Cola Company announced that it was going to change the 99 year-old formula of Coca-Cola, the world's number one soft drink. They had been losing market share to Pepsi for the preceding 15 years and wanted to find a way to get it back. They tested the new formula on almost 200,000 people before deciding to implement it.

When Coca-Cola finally announced that they were going to change the formula there was public outcry like no company had ever seen.

Consumer reactance was absolutely everywhere. Protest groups were forming all over the country including the Society for the Preservation of the Real Thing and Old Cola Drinkers of America. Songs were written about the old flavor, people were hoarding and stocking up on cases of Coke, there were telegrams and letters sent to the company, and the consumer hotline received 1,500 calls a day. Consumers considered anyone that worked for the Coca-Cola Company to blame for the decision. A man asked for the CEO's autograph "because [he thought], in years to come, the signature of 'one of the dumbest executives in American business history' would be worth a fortune" (The Real Story of New Coke).

After just 79 days Coca-Cola reintroduced the old formula alongside New Coke and renamed it Coca-Cola Classic. However, the damage was done and Coca-Cola was second in the market to Pepsi and stayed there until 1986 (Ringold 1988). The company learned a lot from this experience; the most important thing being that people loved Coke and did not want anyone, even the company, to change it. Coca-Cola is very open about the experience, in fact aside from the detail about them dropping to number two in the market, all of the information above is readily accessible on their website.

Many people have referenced the New Coke case as prime evidence for the need to know the market and the importance of researching properly, but this is also a perfect example of consumer reactance. One activist loyal to the original formula said, "When they took Old Coke off the market, they violated my freedom of choice. It's as basic as the Magna Charta, the Declaration of Independence" (Ringold 1988). He believed that he

had the right to choose, and when a marketing effort by the company threatened to take that away, he reacted. People may have responded publicly by protesting or privately by hoarding cases of Coke, writing the company, or calling the company. Whatever the response, it was all reactance in its purest form.

In this example the company was both hurt and helped by the reactance. They spent millions of dollars creating and marketing the new formula, but by the time New Coke came out those were sunk costs. The real costs were Coke's drop in the market place as well as the expense to reintroduce Coke Classic. Before Coca-Cola re-released the original formula, the brand image was terrible. People felt that the company was taking something away. However, there was a bright side from this event for Coke. Because they chose to bring the original Coke back into the market, they are still around and learned something very important about their product: people cared enough about it to make a huge fuss. John Craven, the editor of a site that studies trends in the national beverage industry, said, "If you look at it, the success of New Coke was that it got people pissed off enough to care about regular Coke again" (Ross 2005). In this case, consumer reactance helped Coke in the long run, but that may only be because Coke responded to the cries of their consumers.

The BIC for Her Pen

In 2011 BIC released a new line of products to the market: the Crystal for Her Pens. Margaret Hartmann, who writes for Jezebel, heard about the pens from one of her readers and satirically wrote about it on her blog (Bic For Her: Finally, A Pen Ladies Can Use). This resulted in thousands of women (and some men) going Amazon and writing sarcastic reviews of the product (Bic For Her: What They Were Actually Thinking). As

Mara Judkis from the Washington Post writes, "it's brought them that unique

combination of shame and free publicity that only an Internet prank can achieve" (Bic

"lady" pens unleash Amazon snarkfest).

There are almost 2,000 comments, the top of which was rated over 38,000 times.

Here are two examples that do a good job of capturing the tone of the reviews: "I'd really

like to buy a pack of these pens; but I probably need my father's or husband's permission

first. Like I do with all my financial decisions" and "if you are going to make a pen for

her, please refrain from calling it a ball pen. we're [sic] confused enough" (BIC Cristal

For Her Ball Pen). In general, the reviews sardonically made light of the traditional sexist

stereotypes that women have been battling for years. And though the commentary is very

funny to read, it is clear that the authors were not pleased with the obviously sexist

product. However, it was not just the comments, the consumers also asked 83 questions

and the media picked up on the story. The responses were broadcasted in what is now a

classic example of "what happens when you try to build your brand by looking at it

through the lens of data rather than from the perspective of your consumer" (Bic For Her:

What They Were Actually Thinking).

BIC made several mistakes, but the one that started it all was deciding to label the

product for women. Consumers regarded it as blatant sexism against women. There

would have been nothing wrong with the product, had it not been labeled the way that it

was. The bad choices did not end there. Even though women were clearly insulted and

the reviews were building up, BIC did not protect the Twitter handle @BicForHer and

did not purchase the domain name bicforher.com (How BIC Could Have Avoided the

'BIC for Her' Social Debacle). Instead consumers got them and used them to further mock the company for its sexist product.

Worst still is the fact the company never responded to any of the reviews, in fact they did not say anything at all (How BIC Could Have Avoided the 'BIC for Her' Social Debacle). They took a social media beating and were silent, which makes them come off as clueless. This is a clear case of consumer reactance, but did it hurt the company? Yes and no. Because of the nature of the company, the product, and the reviews this was not a big deal. It did, however, make BIC look incredibly sexist and completely oblivious. Perhaps BIC did not suffer monetarily, but they looked incompetent, which is never a good thing for a company.

Walmart & Pitbull Go to Alaska

In 2012 Walmart and Sheets Energy Strips teamed up with rapper Pitbull in a new marketing campaign. The rapper agreed to go to the city whose Walmart Facebook page received the most "likes" (#ExilePitbull Worked). David Thorpe, a writer for the *Boston Phoenix*, heard about the campaign and sent out the tweet: "Pitbull is having a contest where he'll visit the local Walmart that gets the most FB Likes. @fart and I are sending him to Kodiak, Alaska" and encouraged his followers to use #ExilePitbull in their tweets (Internet Pranksters Hijack Walmart's Facebook Campaign). The push to send Pitbull as far away as possible took off and when the polling finally closed the Kodiak, Alaska Walmart branch had over 70,000 likes (Rapper Pitbull Visits Kodiak, Alaska).

Instead of backing out of his deal with Walmart and Sheets Energy Strips, Pitbull chose to go through with the sweepstakes. On July, 17 2012 Pitbull released a video: "I heard that Kodiak, Alaska, has the most likes due to someone who thinks he was playing

a prank," Pitbull said on the video. "I said, `OK, great, this sounds really good.' You have to understand I will go anywhere in the world for my fans" (#ExilePitbull Worked). He also invited David Thorpe, the writer that incited the prank, along for the journey; he accepted the invitation. While in Kodiak, Pitbull made an appearance at a community event, received the keys to the city, visited the Kodiak Walmart, and was given a gift basket that included Bear Repellent (Pitbull Performs in Kodiak Alaska).

Thorpe traveled with Pitbull and live-tweeted all three hours that Pitbull was there. In a final comment Thorpe said, "I guess my one regret is that everyone on the corporate side will probably spin this as a Big Social Media Win, which is kind of gross" (#ExilePitbull Worked). Coincidentally, that is exactly what happened. When asked about the campaign a Walmart spokesperson said, "It was an absolute surprise but a great outcome. Our associates, they're just so happy and the letters and the pictures that we're getting … and just how fun this campaign has been, it's just been great" (Internet Votes to Send Rapper Pitbull to Alaska Walmart). The event evoked mass media coverage and Pitbull has received a lot of positive feedback for being a good sport.

It is clear that there was a specific marketing campaign that set the reactance in motion. However, in reading the tweets it is apparent that the real target of the campaign's sabotage was not Walmart; it was Pitbull. The spokesperson from Walmart explained that the outcome was a surprise, but a good surprise. However, Pitbull sent out the following tweet two weeks before polling closed, "@Arr luv watchin the competition latinos r passionate 4 sho maybe @WalmartSpecials can bring Kodiak 2 Miami ;) #exilepitbull #keeppitbull305" (@Pitbull). This tells us that at the very least, Pitbull

preferred to not go to Kodiak. But Pitbull did go, which lead to some very positive press for both Walmart and the rapper.

Even though the reactance was not necessarily focused on Walmart, it is still reactance. In addition, Thorpe's fear that Walmart would spin this as a win came true. If Pitbull had not gone, this would be a different and arguably less interesting story, but because he played along, consumer reactance did not hurt the company.

Dub the Dew Goes Terribly Wrong

In August 2012 Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen (an international Italian restaurant franchise) reached out to the public, asking for help naming the new Mountain Dew flavor that they created. They launched a viral contest entitled Dub the Dew where users could submit and vote for their favorite new name for the green apple flavored soda (Mountain Dew's 'Dub the Dew' Online Poll Goes Horribly Wrong). According to the restaurant's Facebook page, the sweepstakes began on July 16, 2012 and ran until August 14, 2012 when the site was hacked (Villa Fresh Italian Restaurant).

The polling website was flooded with off color submissions, so that by the time the site was actually shut down the number one name for the new soda was "Hitler Did Nothing Wrong". The remaining top nine were "diabeetus", "fapple", "fapulous apple" and six variations of the phrase "gushing granny" (Mountain Dew 'Lost to the Internet'). However, that was not all. Hackers also got on the website imbedded Rick Astley's "Never Gonna Give You Up" music video and wrote the two following messages: "le 9gag are legion" (9gag is the enemy site of 4chan – 4chan is an imageboard website where commenters can post whatever the want anonymously; it is a popular forum for

Internet-hackers) and "Mtn Dew salutes the Israeli Mossad for demolishing 3 towers on 9/11!" (Mountain Dew Naming Campaign Hijacked).

Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen received a good amount of negative feedback on its Facebook page, but the real target of this behavior was Mountain Dew. It was clear that 4chan disapproved of the campaign, but forums on Reddit (another similar, online forum) also "mocked the audacity" of it (Mountain Dew's 'Dub the Dew' Online Poll Goes Horribly Wrong). Mountain Dew released a statement to AdWeek: "'Dub the Dew,' a local market promotional campaign that was created by one of our customers—not Mountain Dew—was compromised... we sincerely apologize to all of our fans who may have been offended by this customer's program" (Mountain Dew Soda-Naming Contest Crashed by Pranksters). Similar to the situation between Pitbull and Walmart, the company that actually started the campaign was not the one that was attacked by the reactance.

It is clear that consumers were reacting specifically to this marketing campaign. Additionally, this promotion happened right on the heels of the Walmart and Pitbull campaign and crowdsourcing something like this put a target on both Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen and Mountain Dew's backs. Even though Mountain Dew did not start this campaign, it was the target of consumer reactance. It is pretty clear from reading the apologies from both companies that the response received was in no way what they had expected nor wanted. However, aside from the handful of angry customers that posted on Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen's Facebook wall, it is apparent by the tone of the cited articles that people knew that it was not either organization's fault. That being said, I believe it did hurt Mountain Dew's brand image. A spokesperson reminded AdWeek, "Mountain

Dew has a legacy of engaging its most loyal fans to tap innovative ideas for the brand through really successful programs like 'DEWMocracy' and 'Your Malt Dew'" (Mountain Dew Soda-Naming Contest Crashed by Pranksters). Mountain Dew's past successes with Internet crowdsourcing only made them look worse because of Dub the Dew's failure. Mountain Dew tweeted "Dub the Dew definitely lost to The Internet. It was a local customer program, not a Dew one, & we're helping them clean up" (Mountain Dew 'Lost to the Internet'). The event made them look out of control and cast an inappropriate shadow on their brand. Additionally, it is clear that Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen had also hurt its relationship with PepsiCo because of this campaign. Even though the reactance was pointed in the wrong direction, this is still a very clear case of consumer reactance. Unlike the Walmart case, both companies were hurt by the situation. If nothing else, Mountain Dew was made to look foolish and Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen's relationship with their supplier was hurt.

McDonald's #McDStories

On Wednesday January 18, 2012 McDonald's released two Twitter hashtag campaigns. The first was #MeetTheFarmers and the goal was to tell the stories of where the company got its fresh produce (McDonald's Twitter Campaign Goes Horribly Wrong). The second hashtag, #McDStories, was promoted on Twitter and began with the following tweet, "'When u make something w/pride, people can taste it,' - McD potato supplier #McDStories" (#McDStories, McDonald's Twitter Hashtag Promotion). The intention of the second campaign was for consumers to tell their "heart-warming" stories, but that is not what happened (#McDStories: When A Hashtag Becomes A Bashtag).

The campaign actually inspired very negative feedback for McDonald's. The tweets included references to food poisoning, diabetes, weight gain, and eating the food while high. There were comments about rodents in the food, chipped teeth, and even an encounter with PETA (#McDStories, McDonald's Twitter Hashtag Promotion).

Rick Wion, McDonald's social media director, admitted that the "#McDStories did not go as planned" and that the campaign was pulled within two hours (McDonald's Twitter Campaign Goes Horribly Wrong). He went on to explain that within an hour of pulling the #McDStories from the promoted trends list on Twitter, conversations using the tag fell from about 1,600 to a "few dozen" (How McDonald's Twitter campaign fell into the fire). Wion also blamed the media for making the whole situation into a bigger deal than it actually was. According to him the negative feedback only accounted for 2% of McDonald's mentions that day (McDonald's Twitter Campaign Goes Horribly Wrong).

This campaign did hurt McDonald's because instead of Twitter being flooded with positive feedback about the brand, it was negative. The media did not let McDonald's shake it off and continued to remind people of the story. That is one of the biggest threats of consumer reactance, when the media takes what may have been a small misstep by the company and turns it into a big story. Many consumers had bad stories to tell about McDonald's and the company supplied the perfect medium to share them. The company had done things wrong in the past and consumers were not willing to simply let McDonald's promote their brand. "Whether it's true or not is irrelevant. McDonald's in this case had no idea what their true perception in the marketplace was. They didn't see their brand the way consumers did. So when they tried to portray their brand as

something it wasn't, at least from a perception standpoint, they got dinged" (How McDonald's Twitter campaign fell into the fire). Instead of generating discussion about the freshness of the product or people's good experiences at the fast food restaurant, the exact opposite happened. The consumers talked about the low quality of the food and their bad experiences. This hurt McDonald's, perhaps more than

they realized.

Belvedere Vodka's Date Rape Ad

In 2012 Belvedere Vodka, a subset of Louis Vuitton Moet Hennessey, which is an international company that owns over premium 60 brands, tweeted an image and posted it on the company Facebook page. "The image depicted a woman looking horrified while a man grabs her from behind" as she was trying to get away (Belvedere Vodka Ad Under Fire). The image (Appendix 1) also read "Unlike some people Belvedere always goes down smoothly", which is a fairly straightforward reference to oral sex (Social Media Idiocy Of The Day). Within an hour the ad was taken down from both pages, but not before bloggers and commenters unleashed on the brand for making light of sexual assault (Belvedere Vodka blasted).

Belvedere issued an apology that consumers found inadequate and news sources quickly picked up the story. Forbes called the picture "frat boy humor" and went on to discuss the absolute stupidity of allowing this sort of advertisement, especially when there is a strong link between alcohol and date rape (Social Media Idiocy Of The Day). However, the choice to create the ad was not the only bad decision made. It turns out that the image was stolen from a video and Belvedere did not have permission to use it.

Alicyn Packard, the woman in the image, sued the company for "emotional distress and unlicensed use of her image" (Belvedere Lawsuit).

In the end the president of Belvedere issued another apology saying, "The post is absolutely inconsistent with our values and beliefs and in addition to removing the offensive post we are committed to making sure that something like this doesn't happen again" (Social Media Idiocy Of The Day). They also made a large donation to RAINN (the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network), but for many the damage was already done (Belvedere Vodka Retracts Offensive Ad). Aside from the beating that Belvedere took in the press, consumers were actively voicing their opinion against the company, some saying that they would never drink the vodka again (UNBELIEVABLE: Belvedere Vodka Tweeted This Disgusting Rape Ad).

Whether or not consumers actually boycott the brand aside, Belvedere took a huge hit because of this campaign in two ways. Belvedere had to spend money to correct this situation by making a sizable donation to RAINN, enough for the non-profit organization to actually mention on their Facebook (Social Media Idiocy Of The Day) and by paying for the lawsuit and settlement with Alicyn Packard (the actress in the picture used in the ad). There was a direct loss of money because of the event. The second hit that the company took was to its brand. Belvedere positioned itself as a super premium vodka and for Forbes to refer to the ad as "frat boy humor" makes the brand look "bottom shelf". Consumers were directly attacking the brand for being classless and tasteless, which is the exact opposite of the image Belvedere wants to portray. The brand was associated with date rape instead of the high-end lifestyle to which it markets.

<u>DISCUSSION</u>

Plenty can be taken a way from each of these cases, but the most lessons come from looking at the common elements trending through all six of them. One element is that reactance is incredibly unpredictable. It is very unlikely that Walmart and Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen could have possibly planned for the outcome of their campaign. Perhaps a consumer would have guessed that the #McDStories would not go over so well, but after reading Wion's comments, it is clear that McDonald's has such a skewed perspective of their position in the market, that they would have never guessed consumers would lash out against them. Clearly there was at least one person at Belvedere who did not think the ad was in poor taste, otherwise they would have never posted it. Both BIC and Coca-Cola did their research on their new products, and there was clearly a market for them. They did everything right except take on the perspective of their consumer. All six instances could be considered lessons on "what happens when you try to build your brand by looking at it through the lens of data rather than from the perspective of your consumer" (Bic For Her: What They Were Actually Thinking).

Another trend throughout the cases is that reactance is aggressive. They sent Pitbull to the farthest Walmart in the United States, the Dub the Dew campaign could not have been more offensive, and there were actual protests about the change in the flavor of Coke. Tweets about McDonald's held nothing back, attacks on Belvedere were damning, and the thousands of reviews of the BIC for Her pens were intensely sarcastic. Naturally, these cases were selected because they were so aggressive and received a lot of media coverage, but the lesson stands for reactance of all shapes and sizes: people are capable of

hostility toward a brand and are willing to attack it because they did not like what the brand said or did.

Although in some of these cases there were direct monetary losses, the real damage is to the brand. Consumer reactance made the companies look like fools. Walmart, Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen, and Mountain Dew looked like they had absolutely no control over their own promotional activities. McDonald's was openly berated in front of the entire Twittersphere, Belvedere's ad was called "frat-boy humor", and BIC looked completely ignorant. Even Coke looked like they were trying to rob consumers of their freedom. A brand is a company's most valuable asset, and when the brand takes a hit, whether it is warranted or not, it hurts the whole organization.

Pitbull and Mountain Dew teach a very important lesson about reactance: consumers do not always attack the intended target. The Walmart case had three parties: Walmart, Sheets Energy Strips, and Pitbull. The reactance was directed towards Pitbull, and Walmart was just the medium in which consumers could prank him. So, the rapper and the superstore were the story in the media, but Sheets Energy Strips were not. Consumers attacked the easy targets, even though it was Sheets, not Pitbull, that paid for the promotion. Similarly, Mountain Dew did not start the Dub the Dew promotion, Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen did. Mountain Dew, however, got the flak for it in the media, had to make the apologies, and clean up the mess. Again, the consumers went for the big name and the easy target. The point is that consumer reactance may not hurt the intended party as much as a bystander.

Beyond missing the intended target, reactance might not end up hurting the company at all. In fact, even though responding the right way does not guarantee a safe

way out, it is what saved Walmart and Coca-Cola. Because Pitbull actually went to Kodiak and Walmart was excited about it instead of sheepish and embarrassed, the company was able to spin this as a win. Coke listened to their consumers, re-introduced Coke Classic, and then was able to look at this as a success instead of a failure. Besides, they found out how loyal their customers were, and that is very important. Belvedere and Mountain Dew were not as lucky, or able, when trying to correct their mistakes. The tone around their respective promotions was still negative even after they were pulled or cancelled. McDonald's was apparently the only one with an actual contingency plan, but by the time they implemented it the damage was already done. So, how companies react is important, and it might help them save their brand image from some negativity,

Finally, possibly the most important lesson from these cases is that neither the freedom nor the violation of that freedom have to actually exist in order for consumers to feel them. The original formula Coke activist said that Coca-Cola took away his freedom of choice when they took away the formula. Coke did not actually take his freedom to choose what beverage to drink away, they just took away one of the options and replaced it with another. But it does not matter that they did not infringe upon his right, what matters is that he thought they did, so he reacted accordingly. Consumers believed it was their behavioral freedom to keep McDonald's honest about the low quality of their brand, so they reacted when the restaurant tried to portray an image that was not in line with the their perception. In the Wal-Mart and Mountain Dew promotions consumers found the campaigns audacious. In the Belvedere and BIC cases consumers were insulted. No one really has the freedom "to not be annoyed by the existence of promotion" or "to not be insulted by marketing", but if a consumer thinks he does, then he will react.

This was an exploratory research with the intention of learning more about the scarcely documented phenomenon of consumer reactance. It was a preliminary step toward the ultimate goal of fully understanding the cause and effects of consumer reactance. A lot of information was drawn from the cases as well as directions for future research. Listed below are a few hypothesis raised from this pattern matching research:

- Hypothesis #1: Consumer reactance has a negative effect on brand image.

- Hypothesis #2: Consumer reactance has a negative effect on sales.

- Hypothesis #3: When there is a negative effect on sales due to consumer reactance, it is because of a negative effect on brand image.

- Hypothesis #4: Reactance is avoidable if companies take the right measures.

- Hypothesis #5: There is an optimal balance of control between the marketers and consumers.

- Hypothesis #6: There is a specific kind of product or company most/least likely to draw consumer reactance.

Limitations

This thesis is characterized by an exploratory research of a phenomenon, which is an important first step in the full understanding of consumer reactance. From the research of secondary data it is clear that consumer reactance is important and should be considered as such to marketers and companies, but to what extent? Reactance has a potentially greater impact than this research has found, but in order to understand how great would require direct contact with consumers. Because there was no primary data collection (surveys, focus groups, etc.), all information had to be derived from inherently biased media coverage. Additionally, all of these cases were snapshots of very large

marketing strategies. The events occurred, were reported in the media for about a month, and then they were no longer discussed. Therefore, it is not possible to really know what the lasting effects of the consumer reactance are.

Aside from the Coke case, the five other cases happened in the past three years, which is why they are still so well documented. This gives a good idea what reactance looks like in the current social media world, but does not answer the question of how it has developed. Additionally, reactance does not always happen on such a large scale. It can be very small. Small reactance is hard to research, because it is often not reported.

Now that the phenomenon of consumer reactance has been explored in past cases, the next step would be to conduct studies where there is direct contact with consumers. To really understand the lasting effects of reactance, the consumer would need to be interviewed before an event, during the event, and after the event. Then interviewed again later that month and year, and eventually in the years to come. There are other questions to ask in addition to reactance surrounding a specific event. For example, does it matter who is reacting? Can reactance occur in all four Ps of marketing (i.e., beyond promotions)? How much of a difference does it make if the reactance is private or public? Should a company care if the person reacting is not even a customer? Is a company ever really capable of avoiding reactance all together? It is not certain whether or not reactance is long-term enough to impact a company's bottom line, but it is certainly worth researching further.

IMPLICATIONS

Even though this exploratory research does not give a full picture of consumer reactance, there are still some very important implications for both marketers and

companies. Consumers are gaining more and more control in the marketing world and with the power of social media and word of mouth, the importance of understanding and preventing consumer reactance will only get greater. For marketers to begin really understanding this phenomenon they have to start recognizing two things. The first is that consumers are capable, willing, and able to hurt an organization with reactance. Marketers have to think about this fact with every promotion that they create. Secondly, the freedoms that a consumers feel are being infringed upon do not have to objectively exist. In some cases it can be as simple as "the perceived freedom to choose". If advertisers keep these two things in the forefront of their minds, they can start to develop strategies around the consumer instead of around the company.

As marketers develop their plans, they also need to keep the worst-case scenario in mind. McDonald's assumed that their consumers would want to share positive stories about the brand, but that assumption was wrong. One of worst things that could have happened did happen with #McDStories, and it was because they did not consider every outcome. Had they planned for the worst-case scenario, maybe they would not have chosen a neutral hashtag and gone with something more brand positive, like #ImLovingIt. In some instances, like the Dub the Dew promotion, the worst thing that Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen would have realistically imagined was still not as bad as what actually happened. One very important rule is to consider the possible risks associated with asking for customer feedback. Dub the Dew could have written a list of names and had people vote which one they liked the best. Instead, they allowed consumers the option of creating their own, which gave them the freedom to choose inappropriate names. Co-creation is often glorified, but the more freedom a company gives a consumer, the more

danger for backlash, which is what happened in all of these cases. So, marketers need to always ask the question "is the benefit of the possible consumer engagement, worth the risk of consumer reactance?" If it is not, then the advertiser should change or get rid of the promotion. However, if it is then marketers should still consider terrible outcomes, and assume that there is something worse for which they should be prepared. There is a middle ground in marketing between consumer and company control. If companies give too much or too little control to consumers, there is a greater chance for backlash.

Having a contingency plan that fixes the problem is important, and a part of that plan needs to account for the unknown. BIC clearly did not plan for the response that they got, which is probably why they remained quiet and may have made things worse. Belvedere and McDonald's are both good examples of having a contingency plan that has a solution to the problem, but does not fix it. Belvedere sent out an insincere apology and then came back with a more heartfelt one and a donation, but did not fire anyone. It was too little too late. McDonald's just un-promoted the hashtag, which stopped the new tweets, but did not stop the media from picking up the story.

Another aspect of the contingency plan is having one ready when the company is doing nothing more than operating as usual. Villa Fresh started the Dub the Dew campaign, but Mountain Dew had to answer for it. Reactance is not always directed where it should be, and it can be sparked by just about anything. These plans are the difference between the Walmarts and Cokes of the world, and the BICs and McDonalds of the world. Because Walmart kept everything light hearted and rolled with the punches, they were able to turn this into a win. BIC lost because they were at a loss of words

after their mistake. If a company deals with people, then they have to be ready to respond to people.

Finally, the most important implication of consumer reactance is one that most people have heard since they were very young: treat everyone the way that you would like to be treated. It is pretty simple, but companies forget that empathy goes a long way. It is never really possible to truly know everything about a consumer, but it should be a constant pursuit. That way, when a company seeks engagement from their consumers, they are at less of a risk for damaging reactance. Walmart chose an artist that annoyed many Americans and Villa Fresh Italian Kitchen used a crowdsourcing technique that annoyed online communities like 4chan. McDonald's tried to force people to give a false perception about their company, Belvedere and BIC deeply insulted people, and Coca-Cola took something that consumers loved away from them. Even though the companies never intended these consequences, they happened because they were not considering their customers. The point is that marketers should know that they are going to upset customers who have a voice, and it might not even be their target market, but they should do whatever they can to avoid doing so. It might be an unobtainable goal, but striving to see from everyone's angle will help reduce the chance of reactance. Even though the future of marketing is unknown, it is safe to assume that marketers will likely always need to try to avoid reactance.

<div align="center">CONCLUSION</div>

Though consumer reactance is not new, literature on the topic is relatively minimal. The purpose of this research was to explore consumer reactance and the effects that it can have on companies, both good and bad. The research on this topic is far from

complete, but this thesis was an important first step. Future studies should be conducted to test the above hypotheses in order to fully determine how much consumer reactance affects companies and discover ways that marketers can avoid it.

Before the turn of the century, marketing in America has historically been one-way, outbound marketing; that is, marketing that interrupts the consumer. However, the advent of TiVo and other interactive technologies mark a turning point in marketing. They represented the solidification of the emerging trend of consumer control. As technology continued to advance and the Internet turned into a platform of social communication, consumers became more and more aware of when they were the targets of advertising. The population was refusing outdated media tactics, which lead marketers to encourage word-of-mouth marketing.

Marketers felt that consumer engagement would help the company brands, but negative feedback was hurting them. Psychological reactance was a term coined by Jack Brehm in the 1960's who explained that when someone feels that one of their behavioral freedoms is being threatened, they will respond by enacting that freedom. For many consumers the overflow of marketing made them feel as though their freedom of choice was being infringed upon, and they would respond by lashing out against the company.

In conclusion, though the threat of reactance will never go away, when marketers start to treat consumers like people and engage each of them in the way that they want to be engaged, then they will finally have found the right way to combat negative feedback. For now, this research has drawn forth several strong hypotheses for future research. Upon testing these hypotheses we may better understand the phenomenon of consumer

reactance, its causes, and how best to combat it. Until marketers begin to realize the magnitude of reactance and find ways to stop it, it will continue to be a very real threat.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Belvedere Vodka Rape Ad
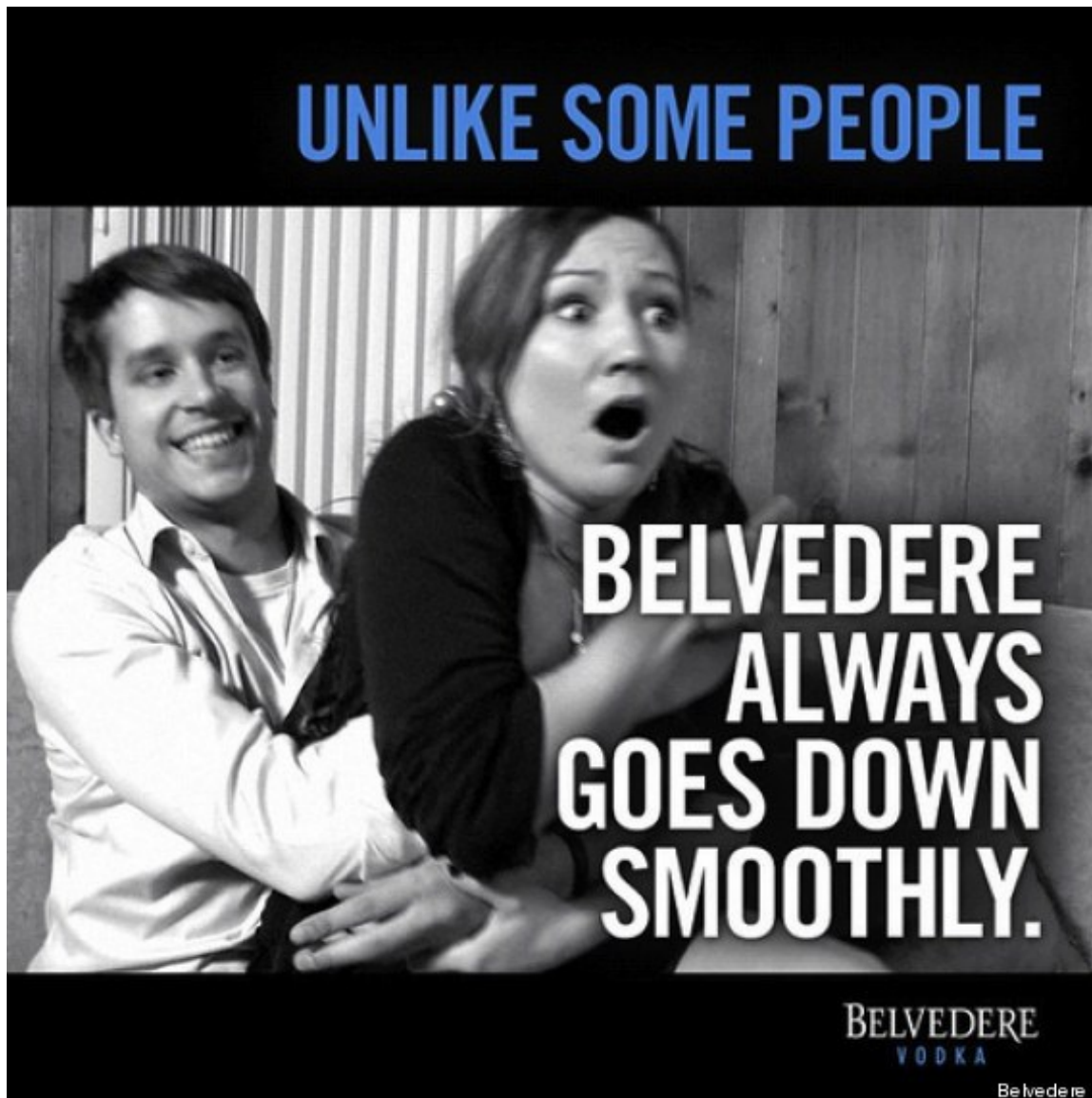
Source: Social Media Idiocy Of The Day

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