



Pepsi's Kendall Jenner Ad: A Case of Failed Marketing

Maeve Dillon

Business Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility



Summary of the Ad

- Released in April 2017
- Featured a staged protest including young diverse individuals
- Kendall Jenner joins the protest, gives a police officer a Pepsi
- **Pepsi's goal:** promote unity and peace
- **Outcome:** massive backlash, ad pulled within 24 hours

The Cultural Context

- Released during heightened activism
- Black Lives Matter gaining momentum
- Protests over police brutality & racial injustice
- Public distrust of corporate activism





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Pepsi's Intended Message

- Align with youth activism
- Promote Pepsi as a symbol of unity
- Use aesthetic activism to connect with Gen Z
- **Tagline:** *"Join the Conversation"*



Why It Failed – Tone-Deaf Messaging

- Simplified real activism
- Used protest as a marketing tool
- Protest signs were vague & meaningless
- Ignored the risks real activists face



Why It Failed – Inauthenticity

- Pepsi had no history of activism
- Failed to support a real cause
- Seen as corporate exploitation
- No real social action behind the message



Why it Failed – Kendall Jenner Was the Wrong Spokesperson

- No history of activism
- Seen as privileged, out of touch
- Audiences felt she was being used for publicity



The Backlash

- #PepsiFail trends immediately
- Activists call it offensive
- Memes & SNL parody go viral
- Pepsi issues apology

Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding. Clearly we missed the mark, and we apologize. We did not intend to make light of any serious issue. We are removing the content and halting any further rollout. We also apologize for putting Kendall Jenner in this position.

The Role of Social Media in Brand Crises

- Twitter & Instagram amplify backlash instantly
- Memes and parodies drive the narrative
- Consumers have more power than ever before

"I have a dream"

-Kendall Jenner



"Now just wait one second officers.

I have a Pepsi."



2017: The Rise of the Belief-Driven Buyer

1 in 2

people are
belief-driven buyers

They choose, switch, avoid or
boycott a brand based on its
stand on societal issues

Of belief-driven buyers,

67%

bought a brand
for the first time
because of its position on
a controversial issue

65%

will not buy
a brand because it stayed
silent on an issue it had an
obligation to address

Consumer Expectations of Corporate Activism

- 64% of consumers will buy from or boycott brands based on social issues (Edelman Trust Barometer)
- Younger generations expect brands to take a stand
- Consumers demand action, not just statements



How Younger Consumers Respond to Brand Activism

- **Gen Z & Millennials:** Want brands to take a stand
- But They demand real commitment, not just ads
- 70% of Gen Z consumers buy from brands that align with their values (Deloitte)



The Influence of Celebrity Endorsements in Activism

- When it works: Celebrities who have real ties to causes (e.g., Leonardo DiCaprio & climate change)
- When it doesn't: Celebrities without credibility (e.g., Kendall Jenner in Pepsi's ad)
- Consumers can tell when it's genuine vs. a marketing move



Examples of Successful Brand Activism

- Nike's Colin Kaepernick campaign: "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything."
- Ben & Jerry's outspoken support for racial justice
- Patagonia's environmental activism





Comparing Pepsi Vs. Nike Activism

- **Nike:** Backed up message with real action, long-term activism history
- **Pepsi:** No prior activism, appeared opportunistic
- **Key Difference:** Authenticity vs. performative branding

The Impact on Pepsi's Brand

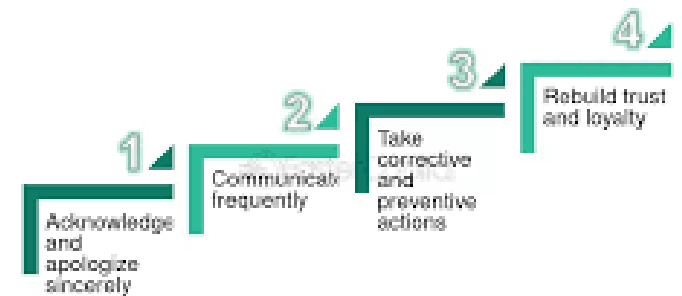
- Immediate brand damage
- Seen as out of touch
- Stock price briefly dropped
- **Critics:** Corporate activism needs to be real



How Brands Can Rebuild Trust After PR Disasters

- Acknowledge mistakes openly
- Engage with real activists and communities
- Take meaningful actions beyond advertising
- Maintain transparency and accountability

How to rebuild trust, loyalty, and credibility with your customers and stakeholders





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What Could Pepsi Have Done Differently?

- Support a real cause with donations
- Partner with real activists
- Be consistent with activism
- Use real stories, not staged protests

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The Long-Term Impact on Pepsi's Marketing Strategy

- Pepsi became more cautious in social messaging
- Shifted back to product-focused marketing
- Damage to brand trust among younger consumers





Lessons From Pepsi's Ad Failure

- Activism should never be used as a gimmick
- Brands must do their research before engaging in social issues
- Listening to the right voices (activists, impacted communities) is crucial



Conclusion

- Corporate activism must be **authentic** Brands must **listen before acting**
- Consumers value **genuine commitment**
- Pepsi's ad is a **lesson in what NOT to do**

Thank You!

