

DOVE:
**A PURPOSE-DRIVEN BRAND
IN A CRISIS OF SINCERITY**

*The Struggle to Navigate Rising
Expectations of Corporate Responsibility*

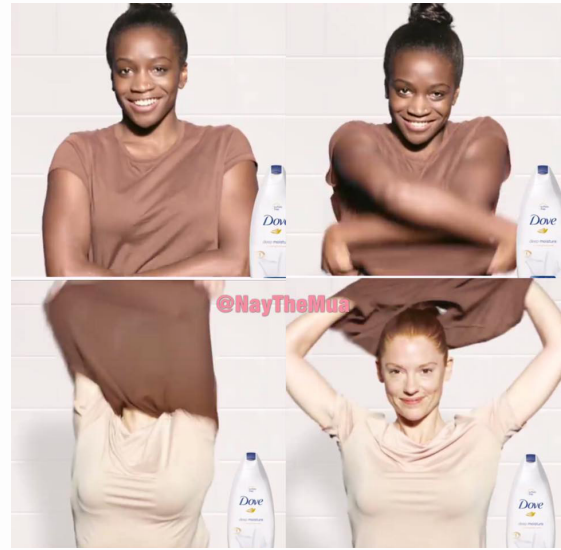


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SYNOPSIS

On October 6, 2017, personal care brand Dove released a three-second body wash ad to Facebook as part of its much-acclaimed Campaign for Real Beauty. The video GIF featured a diverse trio of women individually lifting their shirts and swiftly transitioning from one person to the next: a dark-skinned woman pulled up her brown shirt to reveal a white woman in a cream shirt, who then unveiled an Asian woman in a tan tee. By depicting a woman's transformation from black to white through implied use of its product, Dove unwittingly nodded to an ugly theme of personal care advertising original to the 19th century, when blatantly racist messages suggested that "dirty" people of color could be purified to white with soap. The ad promptly incited a wave of online criticism denouncing Dove for racial insensitivity. The company pulled the ad the following day, but it lived on as a "meme-able" screenshot from Facebook influencer Naomi Blake, whose side-by-side capture showing only the black-to-white transition went viral (Figure 1). Traditional media outlets amplified the negative response.



BLAKE, 2017

Figure 1: Naomi Blake's screenshots isolating the first transition.

Since the 2004 inception of its Campaign for Real Beauty, Dove has championed inclusivity in the personal care industry and built a brand grounded in female empowerment and moved by a social purpose to encourage body confidence among all women. The company lives out its commitment to advocacy in this space through related corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. As a result, Dove has grown the brand to be synonymous with its values. However, with similar blunders occurring in 2011 and 2014, the "T-shirt ad" wasn't the first time Dove stirred racial controversy. Together, these episodes have left many consumers wondering how a company doing so much good keeps missing the mark and whether Dove's activism is sincere.

Two factors are salient for corporate communicators in this case — first, is the importance for companies to prove promises with action and second, is an emphasis on listening. To effectively engage with the world, organizations must incorporate feedback from a comprehensive range of stakeholders. Now, more than ever, consumers are concerned with what an organization does rather than what it says. With this ad, the public perceived a discrepancy between what the Campaign for Real Beauty purportedly celebrates and how Dove chose to promote its products. That the ad represented Dove's third incident of racial insensitivity signals a listening problem as the company failed to act on stakeholder concerns. This case also illustrates how brands navigate rising consumer expectations of corporate activism and the importance of purpose and authenticity as they relate to corporate communication.

DOVE-UNILEVER AND THE CAMPAIGN FOR REAL BEAUTY

Corporate Snapshot

Unilever is one of the world's largest consumer goods companies and is a dominant top 10 performer in annual global consumer product goods rankings by market cap, with leviathans like Nestlé and Procter & Gamble among its competitors (GlobalData Consumer, 2018). The Dutch-English company has a unique twin-headed structure formed by two legal entities, PLC in London and NV in New York and Amsterdam. Although they together function as a single economic engine, shareholders cannot convert or exchange shares for one company to the other.

Unilever has been a fixture in business headlines in recent years. The company announced succession plans in November 2018 for beauty and personal care division head Alan Jope to replace Paul Polman as CEO. In his nine years at the helm, Polman led with a long-term view and was a staunch advocate for corporate sustainability. In October 2018, he scrapped a proposed consolidation plan for Unilever to become a wholly Dutch entity in the face of mounting concerns by activist U.K. investors. During the previous year, and in a move that disappointed many shareholders, Polman fended off an unexpected \$143 billion Kraft Heinz takeover bid. Jope's appointment was said by many to represent stability in turbulent times.

Selling on Sentiment

The company has a brand messaging tradition steeped in emotional appeal, dating to its 1884 founding as Lever Brothers by Londoner William Heskler Lever. He and younger sibling James were among the first to understand and apply human psychology to advertising practices to great effect. Lever pushed his laundry detergent to women as a pathway to beauty rather than on actual functionality, and consumer product marketing was forever changed. From its earliest days, Unilever conveyed social principles through corporate voice (Veiga-Pestana, 2007).

Unilever Fast Facts

- ▶ 400 home care, food and refreshment, and personal care brands sold in 190 countries
- ▶ 161,000 employees worldwide
- ▶ Total revenue of \$61.1 billion in 2017
- ▶ Personal care sales of \$23.6 billion in 2017
- ▶ 58% of business is in emerging markets
- ▶ 47% of managers are women

Figure 2

UNILEVER, 2018

On the Wings of Dove

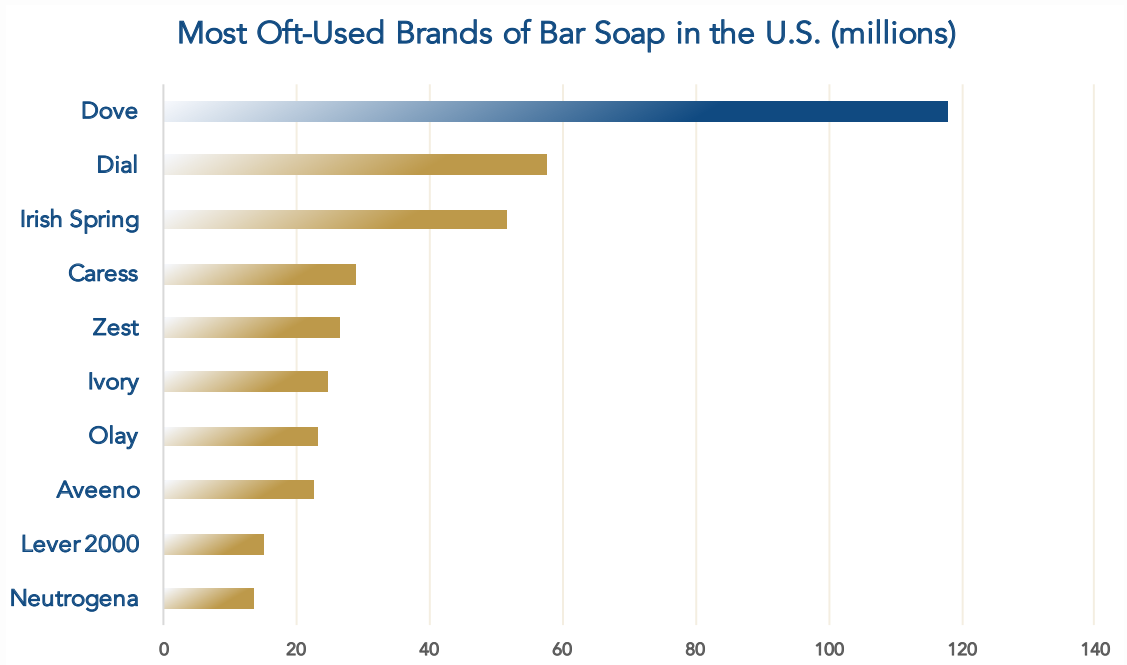


Figure 3: 117 million Americans choose Dove beauty bars in 2018.

STATISTA, SIMMONS NATIONAL CONSUMER SURVEY, 2018

Strategically, the company was one of the first adopters of corporate sustainability, and its vision is grounded in making green living commonplace as a long-term solution for growth.

Bundled under its Sustainable Living Plan established in 2010, the firm’s 26 most eco-friendly brands, including Dove, outpaced the total Unilever product suite by 46 percent and together delivered 70 percent of revenue in 2017 (Unilever, 2018).

Personal care has risen to become Unilever’s biggest category driver since 2011, accounting for about 40 percent of total net sales and Dove the official top trademark company-wide (Unilever, 2018). In 2018, Dove’s brand value of \$6 billion ranked eighth worldwide among leading personal care brands, slotting above Estée Lauder’s titular mark and below L’Oreal’s Garnier group, according to Kantar Millward Brown (2018). Dove was also the preferred bar soap brand in American households by more than double the runner-up choice, Dial (Figure 3).

Dove originated as a “beauty bar” that Lever Brothers introduced to the United States in 1957. The company pioneered a proprietary synthetic compound that made Dove less drying than traditional soaps and, true to form, Lever positioned it as a luxurious bathing experience for women rather than a utilitarian cleanser. The beauty bars were a hit and Unilever has since grown Dove to include hair care, body washes, lotions, and deodorants sold through segmented lines for men, women, and babies.

Personal care has risen to become Unilever’s biggest category driver since 2011

Campaign for Real Beauty

For almost 50 years, much of Dove's advertising centered on promises of youth to women. After Dove's patented cleaning agent expired in 1990, Unilever and Oil of Olay maker Procter & Gamble entered into a tit for tat battle vying for the same customers with virtually no differentiators between the two brands. By the early 2000s, U.S. Dove sales were lagging Olay's. Although Dove still dominated the global market, May Shana'a, a former Unilever director of development, told *The New York Times* in 2001 that its leadership wanted Dove to be "on the top of the mind, like Coke" (Barnes, 2001).

As one of Unilever's products grossing more than \$1 billion in annual revenue, Dove had already been given "masterbrand" status a year earlier as part of an enterprise-wide efficiency strategy. Launched in 2000, "Path to Growth" assayed Unilever's global array of 1,600 brands, many duplicate in nature, and rooted them to 400. The company gave Silvia Lagnado, an executive from its Latin American deodorants group, a newly created masterbrand role as global vice president of Dove. Not only tasked with strengthening sales, Lagnado had to envision a "meaning" for Dove. Consequently, she became the architect of Campaign for Real Beauty. Lagnado found that messages from a long-standing Dove paid media campaign weren't landing with consumers, despite Unilever's reliance on testimonials by real women. She saw a marketing future steered by "brands that are relevant, have purpose and are doing something exciting" (Rogers, 2015). Lagnado led Dove down a path to better understand women's perceptions of beauty and how pop culture interplayed with them.

Dove commissioned a Harvard University and London School of Economics researcher-led survey, coined "The Real Truth About Beauty," of 3,200 women across 10 countries. It explored how portrayals of feminine beauty perpetuating ideals neither authentic nor attainable impacted women's happiness. Among the findings were that only two percent of respondents saw themselves as beautiful. This statistic became Dove's lodestar, and in 2004, the company set out on a new path to reach sales objectives through the Campaign for Real Beauty. The campaign would connect with women on a deeper emotional level by promoting a more egalitarian definition of beauty.

Campaign for Real Beauty initiatives include:

- ▶ *Inspirational advertising highlighting "real beauty" (Figure 4)*
- ▶ *Women's forums for dialogue and debate*
- ▶ *Assorted artistic exhibitions, publications and performances*
- ▶ *The Dove Self-Esteem Project, providing education reaching more than 20 million youth*
- ▶ *The Program for Aesthetics and Well-Being at Harvard University*



Figure 4: Copy for this popular 2005 Campaign for Real Beauty ad read "New Dove Firming. As tested on real curves."

Dove and the Campaign for Real Beauty triumphed, with the latter earning numerous awards and superlatives. Media descriptions of Real Beauty invariably include words like “groundbreaking” and “revolutionary.” Dove rewrote the playbook for how multinational corporations could reach consumers on a more personal level. The campaign is thought to have lifted sales of Dove products from around \$2.5 billion in 2004 to \$4 billion by its 10-year anniversary (Neff, 2014).

Real Beauty reached zeitgeist status when its 2006 “Evolution” film became one of the first clips to go viral in the early days of YouTube and social media (Figure 5). The ad depicts a young woman’s heavily manipulated makeover from the girl next door into otherworldly supermodel, which Dove said uncovered the “truth” behind commercial images. According to Adweek, “Evolution” became one of the most-watched ads ever on YouTube and won many accolades, including two “Grand Prix” at the 2007 *Festival de Cannes* (Griner, 2012).

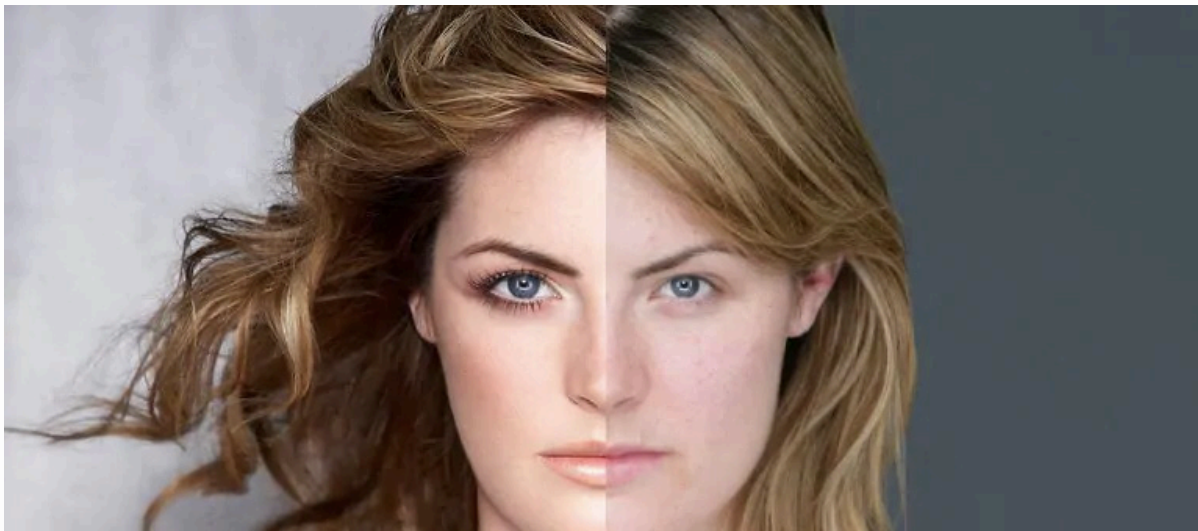


Figure 5: Dove’s 2006 “Evolution” ad.

GRINER, 2012

Dove had discovered a formula that worked in the dawn of social media, and thought-provoking promos became a hallmark of Real Beauty. Dove continues to insert the campaign into global conversation through messaging that always sparks reaction, though not necessarily the kind intended. Nevertheless, Real Beauty’s provocative ads, thought leadership, and educational initiatives combined to form something akin to a social movement.

A Dirty Past

Although Dove may have aimed to celebrate diversity through Real Beauty, many of the T-shirt ad’s detractors said the company instead carried forward a racist trope dating to the late 19th century. In the wake of the Civil War, dual themes of race and hygiene arose within the socio-political sphere as people responded to slavery’s abolition and a greater understanding of infectious disease gleaned from battlefield deaths. Public health threats also intensified as city populations swelled with the Industrial Revolution and demand grew exponentially for consumer cleaning products.



CONOR, 2017

Figure 6: An 1884 Pears Soap ad based on the fable "Washing the Blackamoor White."

Consequently, manufacturers carved out an entirely new advertising genre equating purity with health, safety, and reliability. According to the related narrative, white meant cleanliness and black represented filth, and this cruel stereotype dominated soap ads in particular until World War I. The images and copy often told a story of people of color only becoming acceptable by washing off their "dirty" skin to become the more desirable shade of white (Figure 6). However unwittingly, Dove could not portray the physical transformation of a woman of color into that of a white woman without shining a spotlight on the personal care industry's legacy of racism. See Appendix Figures 1-3 for additional examples of vintage racist soap advertising.

CORPORATE CHARACTER

Corporate character refers to an "enterprise's unique identity, differentiating purpose, mission and values" (Arthur W. Page Society, 2012). To establish an identity and develop corporate character, an organization must first define what its beliefs, values, and purpose are and ensure its operations align across these principles (Arthur W. Page Society, 2013). Since the start of Real Beauty, the heart of Dove's corporate character has been its CSR initiatives and the social value it aspires to create as an advocate for women's empowerment and self-esteem.

Vision Statement

While Dove does not presently publish an official mission statement, its vision statement effectively asserts its aspirations:

“We believe beauty should be a source of confidence, and not anxiety. That’s why we are here to help women everywhere develop a positive relationship with the way they look, helping them raise their self-esteem and realise their full potential” (Unilever, 2018).

Commitment to Sustainability

In 2004, Unilever unveiled a new corporate logo designed to support its then mission to “add vitality to life,” later updating that to its current commitment to “make sustainable living commonplace” (Unilever, 2018). Within are a patchwork of 25 icons expressing Unilever core values coupled with the many diverse aspects of its business, including Dove (Figure 7).



UNILEVER, 2018

Figure 7: Dove - a symbol of freedom, empowerment, and self-esteem.

Social Value

Larry Fink, founder and CEO of \$6.3 trillion investment management firm BlackRock, penned a portentous 2018 letter to CEOs addressing society’s rising expectations of companies to serve a social purpose. “To prosper over time, every company must not only deliver financial performance, but also show how it makes a positive contribution to society,” wrote Fink (2018). His letter reflects how a company’s character is increasingly measured by its social value and corporate purpose.

Since 2004, purpose has been at the core of Dove’s existence. By activating along Real Beauty, Dove has successfully integrated social values into its operations and communicated its purpose in an authentic way to stakeholders. The company’s vision statement reveals how deeply intertwined Dove’s purpose is with its business plan, and further proves that Real Beauty is not just part of a messaging campaign, but truly central to Dove’s mission.

Corporate Reputation

Despite releasing what *Ad Age* called one of the “biggest campaign fails of 2017,” Dove’s reputation improved across many measures in 2018 (2017). Millennial and Gen-Z consumers gave Dove the top spot as the “most trustworthy” brand of 2018 (Figure 8), which Bobby Calise, vice president of Ybrands, credited to Real Beauty (Gazdik, 2018).

Additionally, Dove’s ranking climbed from #28 to #22 in the 2018 *Brand Relevance Index* published by Prophet, a management consulting group. Prophet found that consumers rated Dove highly for “Has a purpose I believe in” and continued to trust the brand as an advocate for women’s empowerment (2018). Among female consumers, however, Dove’s perception saw a decline as it fell out of YouGov’s ranking of top 10 best-perceived brands by women (Marzilli, 2018).

Overall, these measures demonstrate the resiliency of the Dove brand in the wake of the T-shirt ad as well as the lasting impact of Real Beauty.

Previous Incidents

As an isolated case, Dove’s ad may have spurred less controversy. However, its impact was exacerbated by the fact that this is the third allegation of racism against Dove since 2011. As one Twitter user put it, “Okay, Dove... One racist ad makes you suspect. Two racist ads make you kinda guilty” (KeithBoykin, 2017) (Figure 9). Organizational history and reputation are vital considerations when evaluating a crisis. Despite Real Beauty’s renown for bridging emotional connections and trust between Dove and its stakeholders, the brand’s incident record has threatened this progress.



KEITHBOYKIN, 2017

Figure 9: Tweet from Keith Boykin, CNN political correspondent.

Ybrands 2018 Top 10 Most Trustworthy Brands



GAZDIK, 2018

Figure 8: Dove takes top spot as “most trustworthy” brand among consumers ages 13-36.

2011: “Before and After”

In 2011, Dove came under fire for a print ad that was similarly perceived as showing a dark-skinned woman’s transformation into a white person as a resulting product benefit. On May 23, 2011, Copyranter published a blog titled “Dove body wash turns Black women into Latino women into White women” (Duffy, 2011) in reference to a Real Beauty print ad. Within hours, Gawker picked up the story and coverage from CBS, HuffPost, and NBC News followed. In response, Dove issued a statement through its PR agency, Edelman:

“We believe that real beauty comes in many shapes, sizes, colors and ages and are committed to featuring realistic and attainable images of beauty in all our advertising. We are also dedicated to educating and encouraging all women and girls to build a positive relationship with beauty, to help raise self-esteem and to enable them to realize their full potential. The ad is intended to illustrate the benefits of using Dove VisibleCare Body Wash, by making skin visibly more beautiful in just one week. All three women are intended to demonstrate the ‘after’ product benefit. We do not condone any activity or imagery that intentionally insults any audience.” (Nolan, 2011).

2014: “Normal to Dark Skin”

Three years later, critics again attacked Dove, this time for labeling that indicated product suitability for “normal to dark skin,” thus implying that dark skin was not the norm (Figure 10). Similar to its 2011 response, Dove issued a statement reaffirming its commitment to representing “real beauty.” While Dove did not apologize, the company acknowledged that a mistake was made and “there was an oversight from [their] team.” (Rice, 2014). Dove also confirmed that it immediately began correcting labels when the issue came to its attention.

During both incidents, Dove attempted to diminish consumer concern and excuse corporate action. In 2011, Dove denied any wrongdoing or intent to cause offense and explained what the ad was designed to convey. The company attributed the 2014 incident to a production oversight. Together, these response strategies signal that Dove focused on minimizing responsibility for its advertising materials rather than listening to public response. Dove was dismissive, which inevitably led the organization toward its 2017 crisis.



KJBENNTBEAUTY, 2014

Figure 10: Dove Summer Glow gradual tanning lotion classifying skin tones as “normal to dark” on European product packaging.

2017 T-SHIRT AD TIMELINE

Oct. 6, 2017

- Dove posts a three-second video ad to its U.S. Facebook page.
- Later in the day, Naomi Blake comments on Dove's post, imploring the company to consider the perspectives of people of color.
- Dove replies to Blake with a generic response extolling product benefits and commitment to representing diversity in beauty.
- Blake shares screengrabs of the ad and her conversation with Dove to her Facebook account. The photos omit the second transition showing a white woman transform into a person of color.
- Blake's post goes viral, spurring conversation across Facebook and Twitter.

Oct. 7, 2017

10:41 a.m. EST

- #BoycottDove, dormant since 2014, re-emerges on Twitter.

11:27 a.m. EST

- Dove confirms that it pulled the ad and Tweets a partial apology: "An image we recently posted on Facebook missed the mark in representing women of color thoughtfully. We deeply regret the offense it caused" (Dove, 2017).

Oct. 8, 2017

- *The Independent UK* runs a Sunday op-ed criticizing Dove's "sorry you're offended" approach, and *The New York Times* publishes an article detailing how the company dropped the ad after accusations of racism.

Oct. 9, 2017

- Dove publishes a statement to its U.S. Facebook page elaborating on its original partial apology.

Oct. 10, 2017

- Lola Ogunyemi, the London-born Nigerian model featured in the ad, comes out in defense of Dove in *The Guardian's* op-ed column.
- Ogunyemi acknowledges the "lack of trust" between Dove and the public due to the brand's previous offenses, but affirms she is not a victim and that her experience working with Dove was positive.

RESPONSES

Social Media Response

According to data analysis conducted by Mediakit, 65.2 percent of the social media conversation about the ad took place on Facebook and Twitter. Mediakit also found that online attitudes toward Dove in the wake of the ad were primarily critical, with 44.6 percent of posts conveying negative sentiment (2017). Not only were those commenting on the ad disapproving, more than 40 percent of posts discussing the ad mentioned Dove along with a variant of the word “racist.”

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Traditional Media Response

The crisis caught the attention of top-tier media internationally (Figure 11). Many outlets pointed to Dove’s 2011 incident, and as *The New York Times* explained, “the fact that the most recent ad was Dove’s second to cause offense was not lost on social media users” (Astor, 2017).

Dove’s Response

On October 7, 2017, Dove responded to the growing online contempt in a Twitter statement expressing the company’s regret and that it had pulled the ad. However, the company did not release an official apology until October 9, 2017 with a statement that read:

“As a part of a campaign for Dove Body Wash, a 3-second video clip was posted to the U.S. Facebook page. This did not represent the diversity of real beauty which is something Dove is passionate about and is core to our beliefs, and it should not have happened. We have removed the post and have not published any other related content. We apologize deeply and sincerely for the offense that it has caused and do not condone any activity or imagery that insults any audience” (2017).

Since the incident, Dove promised it is “re-evaluating [its] internal processes for creating and approving content.”



Dove faces PR disaster over ad that showed a black woman turning white

The Washington Post

A Dove ad showed a black woman turning herself white. The backlash is growing.

TIME

Dove’s ‘Racist’ Ad Isn’t the First Time the Company Was Criticized for Being Offensive

The New York Times **Dove Drops an Ad Accused of Racism**

theguardian

Dove apologises for ad showing black woman turning into white one



INDEPENDENT

Dove’s apology for its Facebook advert is insulting to people of colour – ‘sorry you’re offended’ really isn’t enough

CASE STUDY AUTHORS, 2018

Figure 11: Sampling of headlines seen around the world in the days following October 7, 2017.

BUSINESS IMPLICATIONS

Stock Performance

While Unilever (NV ADR) doesn't publish Dove-level financial data, the company seemed to experience no obvious impact on its bottom line despite all the tomatoes hurled at Dove's ad within the digital commons (see Figure 12).

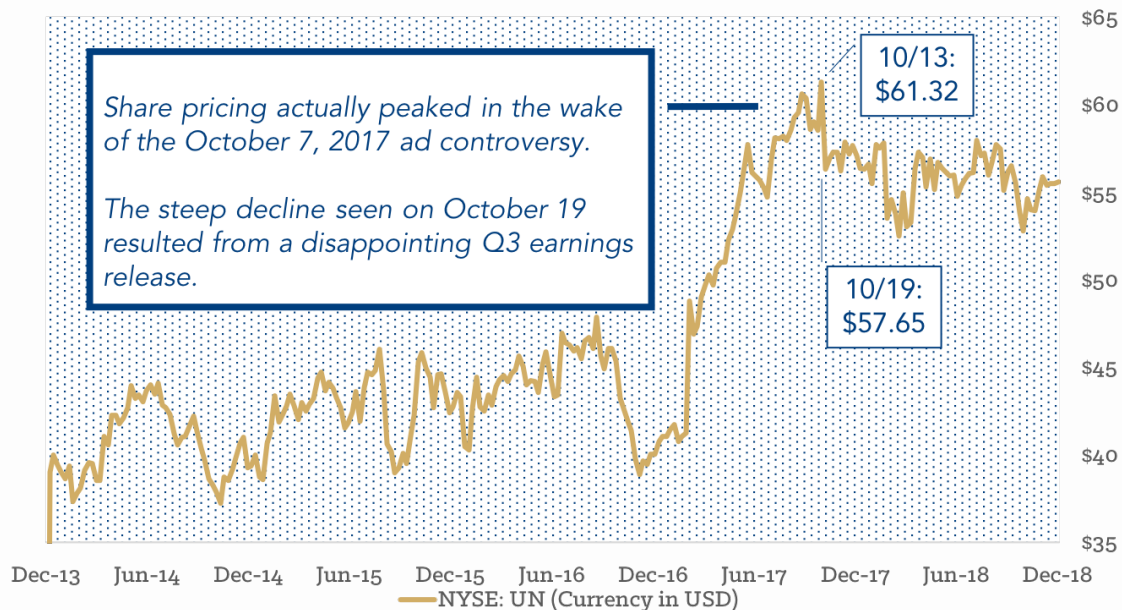


Figure 12: Unilever N.V. (UN) Stock Price: December 2013-2018.

YAHOO FINANCE, 2018

Sales Growth

The negative buzz and calls to #BoycottDove proved impotent. The Unilever Personal Care category encompassing Dove generated \$5.9 billion in revenue with year-over-year sales growth of 4.4 percent (non-GAAP) during fourth quarter 2017 that helped carry the segment's otherwise meager gains of 2.9 percent for the year (Unilever, 2018). See Appendix Figure 4.

Long-term Reputation

It remains to be seen what net effect this third offense of racial insensitivity will have on Dove-Unilever's reputation. Those angered by the ad exhibited little patience for the company's stated benign intent. Many were people of color exasperated by what they saw as tone deafness to the point of offense and disrespect to this customer base. There were calls for Dove to recognize the realities of subtle racism that many said people of color live with daily. The battle cry was loudest on Black Twitter, an influential virtual collective of primarily African-Americans who monitor and respond to shared cultural issues. *The Washington Post* said that Black Twitter's power and impact stem from "witty, sharply worded rebukes that haunt public figures when they do or say something stupid, especially if it's racially insensitive" (McDonald, 2014).

Consider too Nielsen’s landmark February 2018 report, *Black Dollars Matter: The Sales Impact of Black Consumers*, which referenced the activism of Black Twitter extensively when it revealed the outsized influence of African-American spending power (2018) (Figure 13). Though only 14 percent of the population, black people are contributing \$1.2 trillion annually to the overall market (Nielsen, 2018). The study also analyzed a “Consumers of Color” segment and findings revealed that Asian, Hispanic, African-American and purchasers identifying as “Other” together account for 42 percent of U.S. spending in the Personal, Soap & Bath Needs category (Nielsen, 2018) (Figure 12). Nielsen said that “through social media, black consumers have brokered a seat at the table and are demanding that brands and marketers speak to them in ways that resonate culturally and experientially—if these brands want their business” (2018).

Potential reputational effects extend beyond race, given the complete shift in attitude towards socially conscious consumerism first seen among Millennials, but since widely embraced. In a 2017 Sprout Social survey of a diverse group of consumers, 66 percent of participants said “it’s important for brands to take public stands on social and political issues” (2018).

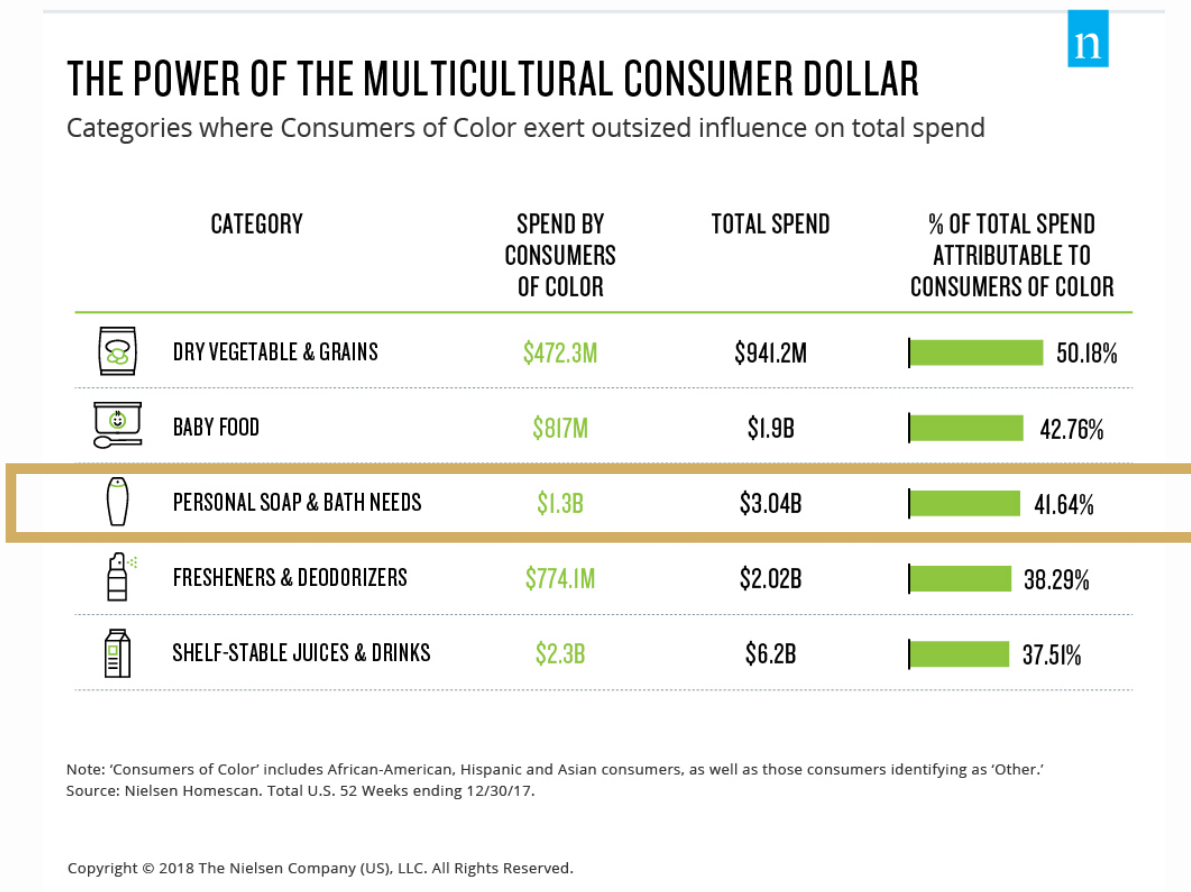


Figure 13: “Consumers of Color” contribute significantly to American spending on personal care.

NIELSEN, 2018

LOOKING AHEAD

When commodity activists like Dove take the stump for social causes, they cultivate higher expectations with the public and are at greater risk for trust destruction. Even a single miscue by a highly reputable company like Unilever with its beloved Dove brand can undermine all previous good works; the failsafe of a trust bank is a false assumption.

That Dove has thrice struck out on racial insensitivity with a powerful consumer demographic is troublesome, even as there has yet to be a significant financial penalty. Consumer tolerance for Dove would likely wane should the company's seeming historical amnesia endure. With the background rise of white nationalism, there's new scrutiny on how companies handle race issues. Consumer activist groups constantly seek platform opportunities to hang their causes on and Dove would be ill-served to keep its ears plugged to the feedback the company keeps getting.

The turbulent socio-political ecosystem layers on complexities demanding nuance. Current political divides, domestic and abroad, further convolute communications for companies avoiding alienation of any one group of stakeholders. Before signaling messages, corporate communicators must stand at the center of an organization and look across the enterprise through a lens to the past and with a view to the future. Nor can companies expect to flourish without proactive, actionable listening. A true, two-way feedback loop must be upheld to guide the most precise communication to safeguard baseline reputation.

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APPENDIX



Appendix Figure 1. Lautz Bros & Co. Postcard for Stearine Soap, 1870.

A Person of Color is Washed White with the Tagline: "Beat That, If You Can" from the Boston Public Library Digital Commonwealth (Retrieved 2018).



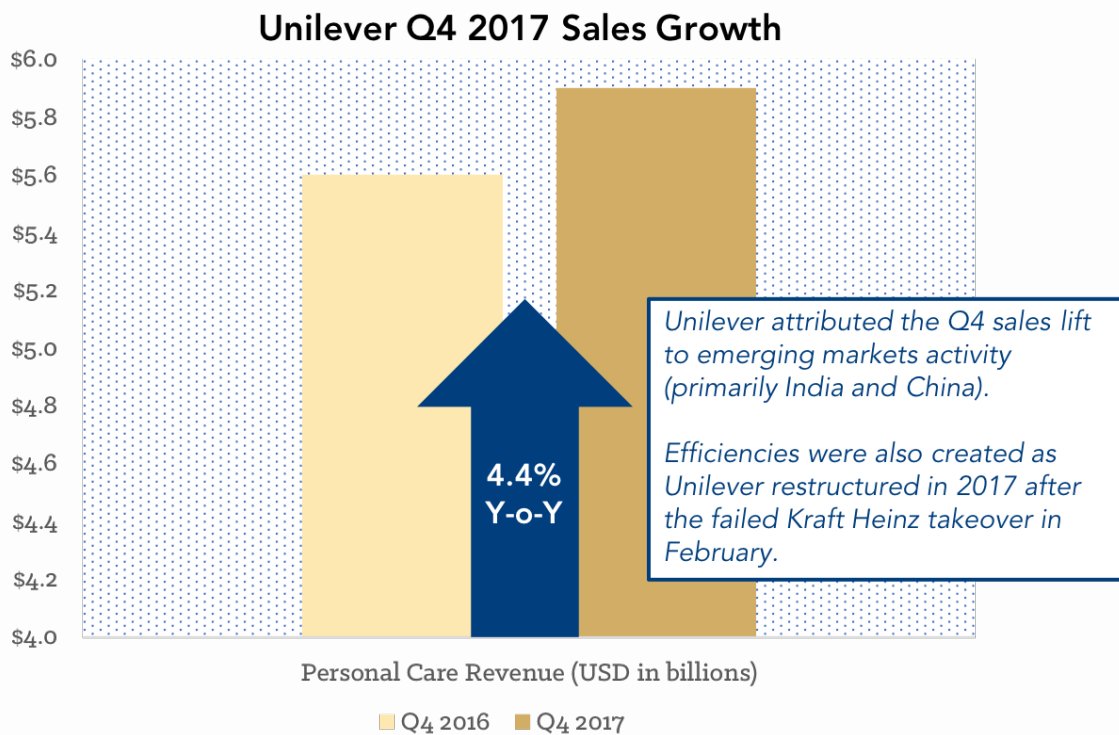
Appendix Figure 2. Poster for Le Savon DIRTOff, 1930.

The English Translation of this French Advertisement Reads: "Dirtoff Soap Makes Me White! Sold Everywhere! DIRTOff Soap, for Mechanics, Motorists and Housewives, Cleans Everything" from Glenn (2009, p. 169).



Appendix Figure 3. Marketing for French Laundry Soap Javel S.D.C., Early 20th Century.

This Bleach Advertisement Includes Product Instructions and the Ad Copy: “With Javel S.D.C. Whitening a Negro Won’t Cost You Your Soap” from Cretton (2014).



Appendix Figure 4. Unilever Personal Care Sales Growth Year-over-Year Fourth Quarter, 2017 from Unilever (2018a).