

Crisis Averted: How Marketers View Brand Safety Now

Executives at Bayer, Boxed and Pernod Ricard see beyond the hype

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After Coca-Cola, L'Oréal, and Procter & Gamble ads were found next to violent and inappropriate online content, brand safety became a major concern for marketers. Months later, the dust has settled and brands are deep in discussions about what brand safety means for them—and what needs to happen to create change and avoid future crises.

Yesterday, at eMarketer's "State of Digital: Trust at the Crossroads" event, Joshua Palau, vice president of digital strategy and platforms at Bayer US, Luis Spencer Freitas, digital marketing director at Pernod Ricard USA, and Elyse Burack, marketing director at Boxed, sat down with eMarketer senior analyst Nicole Perrin to talk about how they're slowing down, moving past the brand safety hysteria, and—most importantly—ignoring the trolls and embracing their audiences in 2018 and beyond.

Here are the four ways these executives are thinking about brand safety in 2018:

No.1: Don't overreact

Marketers' reactions to brand safety crises generated almost as many headlines as news of the crises themselves. But all three executives emphasized the importance of not causing an even bigger internal crisis by overreacting to the headlines.

"A lot of times it's more the brand panicking and less the customer," Freitas said.

"We live in an environment where everything is an overreaction," he added. "Every single thing that happens blows up the entire business."

Keeping brand content away from unsafe material is of course a big concern for all, but Palau stressed that it's more about level-setting and planning than immediately changing course when things go wrong. Taking time to think, instead of reacting immediately, will do a lot more good than any knee-jerk reaction would have.

"Often times not playing into it is the way to go," Burack said. Freitas added, "Just like you A/B test creative, A/B test brand safety, and understand how much of it is actually delivering negative impact to your brand and how much of it is a perceived impact."

No. 2: Stay true to your customer—not the trolls

Social media mobs have existed as long as the platforms on which they speak their minds have, but all three marketers mentioned that it's important to take a close look at who is actually causing the negativity.

"Your reaction has to come out of looking at who was reacting," Palau said. "Is it a bunch of people with free time on their hands and 200 followers?"

If it is, it's probably OK to ignore them. "There will always be those people who are complaining, but if those people aren't your core customer, then you have to put that off to the side and stay true to who you are," Burack said.

She gave the example of a partnership Boxed did with P&G to discount NFL gear. The partnership happened to coincide with the controversy over NFL players kneeling during the national anthem. She said the company got a lot of comments expressing outrage, as well as threats

to stop using Boxed. But after everything settled down, her team did an analysis of who the people complaining were. They found that the partnership was actually very successful among some of Boxed's best customers, and generated a lot of sales and positive engagement. "If we had pulled out, we would have lost out," she said.

Freitas underscored her point: "It's about understanding who your audience is, and what your core offering is."

No. 3: Stop talking and start taking action

People venting on Twitter will always be a constant factor in social media, but for brands the time has come to stop merely siding with one team or the other, and actually start taking action.

"People are going to start calling out companies for just talking and not having actions to back it up," Burack said.

If a brand wants to take a stand on an issue, it needs to have concrete actions or policies to point to when asked or confronted.

"I do see a lot of good in the world, but it doesn't get a lot of clicks, and it doesn't get a lot of advertising dollars," Palau said.

Taking time to share a positive story and make a positive impact with tangible actions can counter any negativity much more effectively than just taking a verbal stand.

"You either need to do something about it or stop talking about it," Burack said.

No. 4: The hysteria won't last

As Burack pointed out, Twitter and other platforms that are available for anyone and everyone to speak their mind are relatively new, in the grand scheme of things.

Freitas added to this, saying, "As with every new technology and transformation in society, things have a peak of hysteria, and then they will stabilize."

And it turns out the crisis might not be so much of a crisis after all—or if it is, it doesn't need to be. Perrin asked Burack, Palau and Freitas to give a number on a scale of 1 to 10, rating how concerned their internal marketing teams are about brand safety. Unsurprisingly to Perrin, their responses were 2, 3, and 1, respectively.

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