

Brands can leverage memes effectively. Here's how.

ARTICLE |

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Memes can be an inexpensive and powerful tool for brands to connect and engage with their audiences on social media. They can help build brand equity and awareness through in-the-moment, lighthearted content.

“Memes are a fun way to enter of-the-moment conversations and jump on the bandwagon of the cultural zeitgeist. They’re a way to show that a brand ‘gets it,’” said Sarah Aitken, CMO of messaging content provider Holler.

But “getting it” isn’t always easy, and what makes a meme successful—wit, relevance, and relatability—can also be its downfall. Not only do brands risk offending people, given that humor is subjective, but marketers also have to worry about being labeled “cringey” for seemingly trying too hard or hopping on a trend too late in the game.

“Many brands have tried to piggyback on an internet trend and fallen flat on their faces,” said Don Caldwell, editor-in-chief of internet culture database Know Your Meme. “There’s even a meme mocking brands that do this, called ‘How Do You Do, Fellow Kids?’ based on a screen grab of Steve Buscemi in ‘30 Rock.’ Brands need to avoid being seen as the ‘How Do You Do, Fellow Kids? Steve Buscemi.’”

There’s also a brand safety risk: Memes are made to go viral, but when they do, they can often take on a life of their own.

“Many viral memes are borderline or explicitly dark humor,” said Denis Litvinov, chief information officer of FunCorp, a mobile entertainment app development company. “Those kinds of memes can alienate certain groups or cause them to reject an associated brand and, therefore, should be avoided.”

With that in mind, there are three main factors brands should consider when deciding whether to include memes in their social media strategies: audience, authenticity, and appropriateness.

- **Audience:** Young generations are bigger meme aficionados than older people are. In a GlobalWebIndex survey from March, for instance, 54% of US and UK internet users ages 16 to 23 said they had looked at a meme on the day of the survey, as had 41% of those ages 24 to 37. Meanwhile, just 21% of those ages 38 to 56, and 9% of those ages 57 to 64, had done the same.
- **Authenticity:** In short, memes may not be right for every brand identity, even if the target audience is in the right age group. Take direct-to-consumer brand Cuts Clothing, for example. Despite the fact that its main customer base is ages 28 to 40, it has decided to steer clear of using memes in its marketing, said Steven Borrelli, founder and CEO of the brand.
- **Appropriateness:** Since memes are supposed to be culturally relevant, they often touch on sensitive or controversial topics. Per research by HubSpot and Talkwalker, for example, some of the most common meme topics between July 2019 and August 2020 included COVID-19, the economy, and politics.

For more on how brands can use memes in their social media marketing or as a social listening tool, Insider Intelligence subscribers can read our latest report:

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To Meme or Not to Meme?

