

5 Engagements That Went Horribly Wrong

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It is inevitable that brands will try to leverage 'passion points' as a way to create meaning and relevancy for brands. However, it's not always as easy as it looks.

At the most simplistic level, connecting with passion points is an attempt to garner attention in a time-starved world. There are, after all, a huge range of brands with similar functional and emotional benefits.

It could also be a way that brands attempt to leverage key "cultural moments" in the hope that such an attachment will become fixed in the minds of consumers.

And finally – at its most sophisticated – this drive for connection can also be a search for values that can be profitably transferred from a cultural entity to a brand.

Sometimes all three factors propel brands in their push to become part of the cultural conversation.

But if it's clear what brands get out of it, a successful positioning must deliver a value exchange that works for all the parties involved: the brand, the property and the people.

There is a détente that has to be observed in order for everyone to come out ahead. It is a delicate balance that brands get wrong entirely too often.

In fact – like any unwelcome party guest – such mistakes can be classified into one of five categories.

1. The Overbearing Bore

We have all met them. You and your friends are having a great time when a loudmouth barges in on the conversation and won't stop talking about himself. Everyone makes a mental commitment to escape at the first opportunity, and the host is criticised for his poor handling of the guest list.

In the UK, the Premier League's Newcastle United has played at its stadium, St James' Park, since 1892. For the people of Newcastle, the club and the stadium were irrevocably connected. It's understandable, then, that the re-naming of the ground to the "Sports Direct Arena" did the brand no favours.

2. The Tight-Fisted Party-goer

If someone is kind enough to invite you to a party, the unspoken rule is that you bring a gift (a bottle, a box of chocolates) that helps everyone have a good time and feel appreciated.

The Olympics is an inclusive celebration of sport that should inspire and unite visitors from around the world, but Visa's contribution to this party was to prevent fans from buying tickets or using ATMs unless they used a Visa card.

The company suggested that “the easiest way to obtain a Visa card is to contact your existing bank... Alternately, anyone can purchase a Visa prepaid card from a Visa card issuer, which can be used immediately. Please visit the Visa website for details.”

I hope that this was effective at driving down their cost per acquisition, but what it didn't do is deliver the desired “sweet spot”: a positive value exchange with the fans.

3. The One Night Stand

It all seemed to be going so well. You met, found that you had quite a bit in common, spent a little quality time together and then... nothing. S/he didn't call.

Here's a little test for UK readers: who sponsored the FA Cup before Budweiser? Who has taken over the League Cup?

In other markets, simply change the name of the competitions and ask yourself the same questions. Building connectivity with consumers requires long-term commitment.

4. The Naif

You like fancy dress and your more glamorous friends said it was going to be a fun party. You arrive and discover that everyone else is dressed in rubber. You make your excuses and leave.

The problem with popular culture is that it can be unpredictable, which causes huge problems for brand management. Whether it's Tiger Woods or Kate Moss, brands need to be comfortable with not only the opportunity, but also the risks of working with figures and topics in popular culture.

Although Cristal Champagne saw sales shoot through the roof because of its association with hip hop aristocracy, the CEO's comment that he regarded the phenomenon with “curiosity” led to a high-profile lambasting by Jay-Z. Know the rules before you decide to play.

5. The Disco-dancing Dad

After alcohol has set to work on your initial party inhibitions, you decide to take to the dance floor and “bust some moves”. A close friend eventually points out that the other party-goers are regarding you with incredulity rather than admiration.

Electrolux may have worked hard to activate its sponsorship of the 2011 Cannes Film Festival, but the response from most observers was “?”. The fit between the world’s most glamorous film awards and the global white goods giant may have been a bridge too far.

The opposite faux pas is being over-dressed for an event. Teaming Elizabeth Hurley and beef jerky – even if it’s organic – is another partnership that simply doesn’t fit (yes, this really happened).A

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