



You're Cancelled


How Brands Can Use PR and Content to Navigate a Crisis

mutant

Picture this: you've woken up to a public relations disaster – your social media team is panicking, everyone you know is messaging you and asking what's going on, and you've been informed that your brand is being cancelled.

Where do you go from there? How do you respond? What should you do?

For many brands that have found themselves cancelled, the answer to these questions has been to play defense, to double-down, or to ignore the situation by laying low and hoping it goes away.

 Spoiler alert: that's the opposite of what a brand should do.

Take, for example, the 2018 Dolce & Gabbana fiasco in China. After the Italian fashion house was heavily criticized by Chinese consumers for its **insulting** ad campaign, the brand simply removed the ads from its social media channels. No statement, no apology, just a quick delete and duck.

Then, a screenshot of a direct message conversation between Stefano Gabbana, the co-founder of the label, and a fashion blogger surfaced – and it was filled with horribly racist generalizations about the country.

Rather than apologizing, listening to criticism, and taking steps to make a fundamental change, the brand released a statement claiming both its account and Mr. Gabbana's had been hacked. (Yes, really.)

It comes as no surprise then that Dolce & Gabbana lost valuable celebrity endorsements and retail partnerships in China and experienced a **98% drop in sales that year** – something that it has **yet to recover from** in the country.

In a similar vein, Volkswagen's 2015 diesel emissions scandal not only resulted in a 40% drop in market capitalisation for the brand, but reflected poorly on Germany, where the automaker is headquartered, and lowered **the nation's brand value by US\$191 billion**.

Though these examples serve as cautionary tales, they also illustrate the power of cancel culture to not only ruin a brand's reputation, but impact a business's bottom line.



Cancel Culture is Real – But Can be Navigated

Because being “cancelled” can ruin a business’s reputation and revenue, it’s imperative that businesses treat cancel culture as more than online outrage or a momentary social media storm that will pass. That attitude grossly underestimates and undervalues what cancel culture truly is: the ability for consumers to hold brands accountable, and the opportunity for brands to listen, learn, and implement change.

Yes, this means that it is possible for brands to bounce back from being cancelled.



“I think what brands often fail to realise is that the ‘cancellation’ usually stems from a need to persuade. It might be attempting to persuade the company to change its policies, or get behind a movement, or fire someone responsible for a damaging statement or act. If you actually take the time to listen and align your subsequent content with your longer-term actions to change and improve, you will see people’s anger subside.”

Rebecca Lewis, Strategic Director

But doing so successfully will not happen overnight, and requires an immense amount of humility, open-mindedness, and effort. That’s the only way to win back the hearts and minds of the consumers you’ve lost.

Like other types of crisis communications, there is not a one-size-fits-all solution for a company in the midst of cancellation – it requires a tailored approach that specifically addresses the reason why the company is under fire.

That said, there are steps companies can take to prepare themselves for such a crisis and ensure their response is not only swift, but solid.

First Steps to Manage Being Cancelled

Step 1: Identify Why and Who

First things first: you need to find the root of the issue. That means:

- 1) Identifying why you are being cancelled
- 2) Identifying who is cancelling you

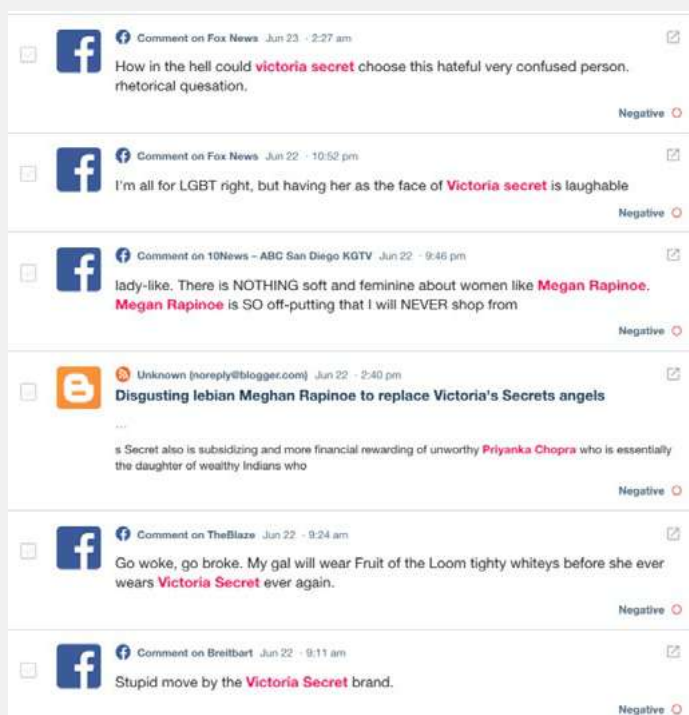
Once you know precisely what the problem is and who is angry, you'll have a better idea of what actions you should take. Use social media monitoring to your advantage here to measure sentiments and give you data-backed information about the conversation online.

For example, when [Victoria's Secret announced a rebrand](#) that included retiring its famous Angels and working with a more diverse and inclusive group of women, the outcry online was loud. But the loudest naysayers seemed to be from more conservative corners, especially male political pundits and evangelical women who were upset with the brand's decision to partner with a gay professional athlete – and those people aren't necessarily the target audience for the lingerie brand.

Could Victoria's Secret have done a better job of preparing its consumers and easing people into this decision and brand change? Perhaps, but the shift is very much in line with the criticism the brand has received over the years, which included [a drop in sales](#) as customers began purchasing from body-positive brands. In short, the change had been a long time coming.

By monitoring the chatter online surrounding the rebrand announcement, Victoria's Secret knew that although they were a major topic of conversation, they were not truly being cancelled by their customers or their target demographic.

However, if what you discover after examining social sentiment is that your customers and target audience are cancelling your brand and/or that you have an issue with a campaign or a spokesperson, you need to take action.



Excerpt from the online outcry

"You need to use social listening to know what people are saying and believing. But more than this, you need to look for data and look at the bigger picture. Usually the negative sentiment is lower than you think and you can then use the data and a big-picture approach to inform your plans moving forward."

Lina Marican, Managing Director

Step 2: Release a Statement – the Sooner the Better


The first piece of external communication you should release is a statement that acknowledges the situation and the fact that people are upset – without gaslighting people or getting defensive. But there is a right way and a wrong way to do this:

Good Apology vs. Not-So-Good Apology



"The comments I made were unacceptable and disgusting, full stop. Comments that I regret and to everyone I've offended, I am sorry, these are attitudes I've left in the past. ...That isn't an excuse, I take responsibility for my mistakes and hope you can understand that my younger self doesn't reflect who I am today. Again, I'm sorry to everyone I've offended. To the LGBTQ community and my supporters and friends, my deepest apologies."

– Stormzy



"Our Instagram account has been hacked. So as the account of Stefano Gabbana. Our legal office is urgently investigating."

– Dolce & Gabbana

How To Make An Apology Without Apologising (Because Legal Tells You You Can't)

When a brand is embroiled in cancellation, it is imperative that they apologise – sincerely, genuinely, and in a straight-forward manner that is humble and human.

In fact, consumers prefer brands who own up to their missteps and mistakes – a research from Porter Novelli shows that 88% of people are more willing to forgive a company for making a mistake if it shows a genuine attempt to change, and 84% are more likely to forgive a company if it's their first time making a mistake.

If your company is not willing to do this because of legal risk or because higher-ups refuse, then you have already lost. You will get called out for your non-apology – and need to be prepared for this.

However, if the issue is publicly using the exact words "I'm sorry" or "We apologise," the good news is that there are ways to apologise publicly without using those phrases. What's most important is that the statement you release communicates that you understand the mistake, that you understand why people are upset, that you are listening, and that you are making changes.

So long as your message is clearly one of a genuine apology and you follow it up with sincere efforts of change, it will be clear that you are taking the situation seriously. That said, there will likely still be fallout due to the lack of apology – it's a cost that needs to be weighed and considered seriously. And we highly recommend that you say you're sorry.

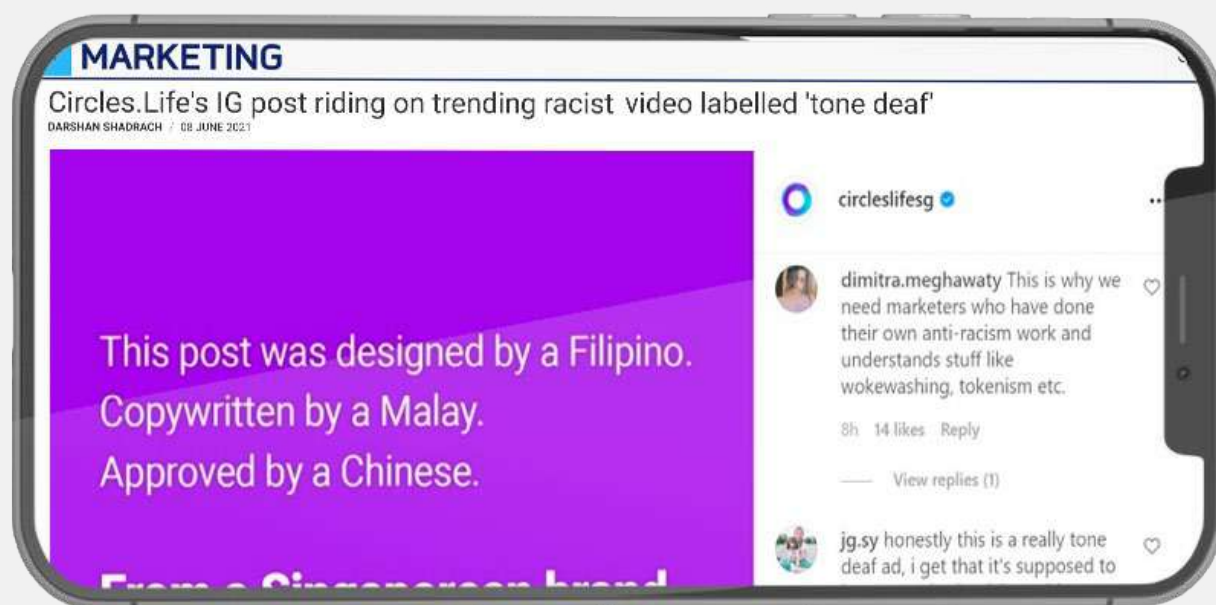
If you aren't prepared to address the situation and need to buy time, your initial statement can simply let people know that you hear them, and that you are working on next steps. There are times when cancelled brands make a statement that stands by their original messaging, but this has the potential to lead to a spill-over effect, where more people become aware of the issue than before. Of course, this could go either way – but if a significant amount of people are upset with your brand's actions, what good will it do to continue sticking to your guns?

For example, [Circles.Life's recent trendjacking](#) of conversations about racism in Singapore was labelled tone deaf by consumers who called out the brand for not understanding the gravity of the situation. Following the uproar, Circles.Life issued a follow up statement that [revealed a remake](#) of its first post – but it missed the mark and brought on another backlash.

Consumers were quick to pinpoint the non-apology while also demanding accountability. This misstep eventually pushed Circles.Life to [issue an apology](#), but it could have avoided the secondary uproar if they had immediately acknowledged people's reactions and not tried to make light of the situation.

"Brands need a crisis roadmap that will help them draft statements and responses quickly and receive approvals as quickly as possible. If a company doesn't have this, they need to buy time with holding statement to let people know they're on it, they're looking into it, they'll get back to everyone."

Lina Marican, Managing Director



Before You Get Cancelled: Some Preventative Measures For Brands

Due to the speed and persuasion of social media, all brands should have a crisis toolkit in place. Companies need to consider what they would do, who they would brief, and how they would respond should a crisis occur. By thinking through and planning ahead of time, brands can take stock of most – if not all – issues that might crop up, and be better prepared to respond with agility if they end up in hot water. Here's how to make it happen:

1. Create a Scenario Map

This helps you to account for different possible issues, showing various outcomes, and giving you a place to start planning. For example, let's say your company prides itself on being eco-friendly, but social media users discover that a major investor is somehow tied to coal mining. Using this scenario, you must consider and plan your initial response and the direction your response would take, i.e. a holding statement on social platforms, or a video from the CEO addressing the issue?

By thinking through potential pitfalls, you can help ensure that your business responds quickly and efficiently in a crisis. And when combined with data from media monitoring and sentiment analysis, a scenario map can be extremely powerful in persuading stakeholders on the best course of action for the brand.



2. Implement a Short-Term Plan for Crisis Communication

Once you have decided on a direction to take, you need to begin rolling out your short-term communication plan immediately. This includes pausing all campaigns that are ongoing, evaluating the situation thoroughly, and then focusing on repairing the damage that has already been done.

Though your crisis communications plan will be unique to your brand and situation, it will need to include the following:



A sincere and heartfelt apology

Drop your usual brand voice, admit the mistakes that were made, and be human.



Reassure that you are listening and learning

Let your customers, target audience, and the general public know that you are taking action and that you will continue to update them on what that action is.



Communicating with stakeholders and employees

Your internal communications strategy is just as important as your external one. Reassure all stakeholders and employees by ensuring there is an open line of dialogue, so that they can voice concerns.



Communicating with the media

Reach out to your media network to let them know you have a statement and an action plan. Share exclusives with them to help supplement your story and take charge of the narrative.

In the age of the internet, people rarely forget. So if you have been cancelled, you must actively make changes and plan for next steps.

A great example of this comes from L'Oreal Paris, a company that was [called out publicly by Munroe Bergdorf](#) during the Black Lives Matter movement.

In response, Brand President Delphine Viguiere personally apologised to Bergdorf and [shared an account of their private conversation across the brand's social media platforms](#). The post detailed how the company had failed to support Bergdorf and was wrong to fire her, and outlined the specific actions the beauty brand would take moving forward. This very public presentation allowed L'Oreal Paris to take back control of the narrative surrounding their brand.

"The initial anger is harder to deal with as it's emotionally driven and reactive. As a brand, you need to get out in front of it with a sincere message and apology, as well as internal comms to explain to employees how you promise to make a change. Employees are key brand ambassadors, so don't forget about them."

Rebecca Lewis, Strategic Director

How to Use PR Effectively During a Crisis

Brands often view PR strategies as a solution to crises – but what they fail to realise is that public relations is not a short-term solution, but rather a long-term tool that should be used to tell their story. Crisis communications should be a part of your public relations strategy, and you really shouldn't wait until you're in the midst of a crisis to think about how to mitigate and survive one.

As a short-term plan for crisis communications, we advise brands and clients to use PR and content as a reactionary way to communicate clearly with the media or the public, as well as with internal stakeholders and employees. Align your teams, draft straightforward statements, and release them across your channels internally and externally as quickly as possible.

From there, your job is to listen, learn, and begin implementing your long-term plan that will bring about real change.

"PR strategies are not a solution, they are a tool. You have to listen, you have to engage, and you have to react. Then you have to make real change."

Matt De Bakker, Director



3. Craft a Long-Term Plan for Success

Once you've put out all the fires with your short-term crisis communications plan, it's time to focus on the future and put your plans into action. This is the only way you will truly see sentiment shift and win back your customers.



Align PR, content, and stakeholders

Your teams must work together and be on the same page regarding the actions the business will take.



C-suite must walk the talk

People will be paying attention to your executives and will pounce on any misstep they make (remember Mr. Gabbana?). Ensure they are on board at work and on their personal social media.



Examine and learn

Use data to learn more about your cancellation crisis and apply the insights to the rest of your business. If other changes need to be made, the time is now.



Follow through

You absolutely must implement the changes you pledged to make. It isn't going to happen overnight, but make sure they do happen.



Send updates

Let stakeholders, employees, and your customers know what you're doing, how you're moving forward, and anything else of note.

Repairing Your Reputation After Cancellation is Possible

Though navigating cancellation can be alarming, uncomfortable, and stressful, it is possible for brands to weather the storm and emerge brighter and better than before. But the only way to do it is by truly listening to people's concerns, using data to inform and bolster decision-making, and implementing real change, be it a complete rebrand, appointing a new committee or advisory board, or changing business practice.

"You shouldn't just apologise – you have to implement real change in order to see real results."

Matt De Bakker, Director

You cannot bounce back without the 3 As:

➡ **Acknowledgement**

🙏 **Apology**

⚡ **Action**

Once these steps have been taken and you communicate updates, results, and continued transformation, you'll see the online sentiments swing back in your favor.

Being cancelled is essentially receiving your biggest – and potentially most damaging – constructive criticism. Brands must root their long-term approach in transparency and open dialogue with consumers, employees, and other internal stakeholders.

Though the road may be long, it will be worth it, in the end. After all, cancel culture is really about accountability – and that's not a bad thing.

Using Content – Not Just PR – to Come Back

Brands should not wait until they're in the midst of a crisis to think about crisis communications – instead, they should have a crisis communication manual in place, detailing their potential shortcoming and challenges while also working on improving these issues.

A regular pipeline of content in the form of thought leadership pieces and progress reports is essential to the recovery of your brand reputation, as it can help launch a broader brand strategy and ease people into a brand overhaul. If done right, when the time comes for the PR team to officially announce changes, it won't come as a shock to your audience's system.

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If you need help creating a crisis roadmap, give us a shout at hello@mutant.com.sg – we're here to help.

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