

J.C. Penney Hitler Scandal to Abercrombie & Fitch's Fat Feud: How Viral Content & Social Sharing Don't Do a Company Good

By Jay Osterholm, Founder & CEO, The ODM Group



Catch-22 of Viral Marketing

The concept at the core of viral marketing is simple: Create content that strikes emotional connections with consumers that spreads like a virus. The content doesn't have to be great; in fact the content doesn't even have to be good. For marketers, however, the thought of bad content spreading like wildfire is akin to nails scratching on a chalkboard. Therein lies the beauty, or curse depending on how you look at it, of viral marketing—it's unpredictable,

and at times, it's downright inexplicable. The innate unpredictable nature of viral content is precisely why we love viral marketing; it's also why we love to hate it too.

The inability to control what content goes viral remains at the core of marketers' frustrations everywhere. As industry professionals, and even just as consumers, it is fun to see what content becomes popular, especially the head turning, eyebrow-scrunching kind. To better understand this phenomena, let's look at two companies that are no strangers to the spotlight of negativity induced by the viral distribution of brand-based content.

A Much-to-Do Over Nothing?

If you are not in the marketing industry, you may ask why this matters. If you are, however, working in this field, you know that viral content is powerful and the result of content "going viral" may not be what you want.

As marketers, we have a responsibility to tap consumer responses and make meaningful emotional connections. We also must take responsibility when we receive negative attention for viral content associated with our brands.

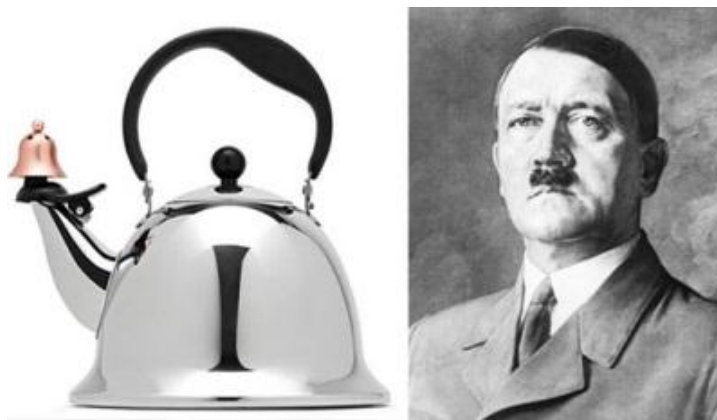
JC Penney: When it Rains, it pours

JC Penney has been plagued by mediocre profits, riddled with bad press, and pegged as a brand to die in 2014. Will the punches ever stop for the flailing retail giant? Predictions have J.C. Penney's down and out by the end of next year, and with all the negativity swirling around the retailer, there is no denying that the company is more or less a sinking ship.

So, what's the origin of the retailer's latest scandal, you ask? If you haven't heard by now, allow me to let you in on the source of the brand scandal: A teapot—as in an appliance used to pour hot beverages. When people, namely customers, started to accuse the teapot of its alleged resemblance to Hitler, so continued the media woes for the troubled retailer. Drawing comparisons between a murderous, monstrous Nazi dictator and a

seemingly innocent teapot may seem like a stretch, but when the comparison went viral, J.C. Penney was forced to acknowledge the uproar. The Michael Graves designed teakettle first appeared on a California billboard (pictured to the right) and the Hitler/teapot resemblance quickly spread in the social sphere on social sites like Reddit and Twitter. I'm not entirely

sold on a striking resemblance between the teapot and Hitler, however, what I do find particularly fascinating is how the kettle gained national fame overnight.



J.C. Penney had no choice but to acknowledge the comparison and **took to Twitter** for some resolve. The retailer responded to Tweets alluding to the resemblance by tweeting back with a generic message that read, "Totally unintended. If we'd designed the kettle to look like something, we would've gone with this" with a link to a kettle designed to look like a snowman (see left).

J.C. Penney's response may not have been the most creative, but at least they acknowledged the controversy. This incident just goes to show the true power consumers have today in the era of digital convergence. If there is a silver lining to this story, though, it's that the kettle sold out on the JCP site in less than 24 hours so it wasn't a complete fail for the retailer.

Abercrombie & Fitch: When the Past Comes Back to Haunt You

“Candidly, we go after cool kids. We go after the attractive all-American kid with a great attitude and a lot of friends. A lot of people don’t belong [in our clothes], and they can’t belong. Are we exclusionary? Absolutely” – Abercrombie & Fitch CEO Mike Jeffries, circa 2006

Those were the words of Abercrombie CEO Mike Jeffries in a 2006 interview. The comments caused quite a stir years ago, but have recently resurfaced, and went viral again. The resurrection of Jeffries’ comments outlines a clear case of the past coming back to haunt a brand. The popular clothing store, known for its array of provocative advertisements decorated with scantily clad models, doesn’t offer sizes beyond a large for women. So, how do comments that are 7 years old become headline news in the present-day? Two words—A blogger.

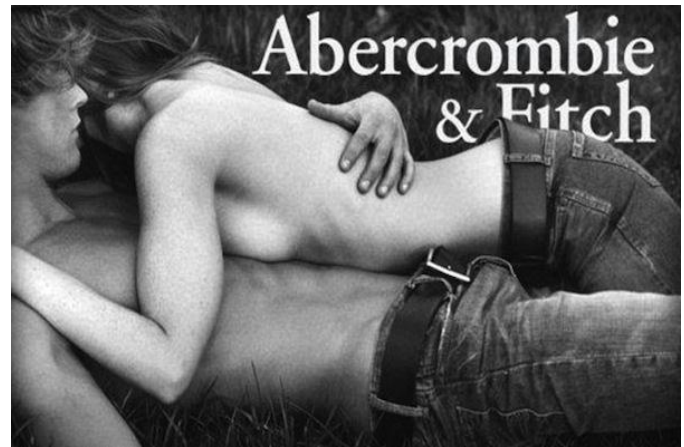
Jes Baker, who pens the blog “The Militant Baker,” recently **challenged Jeffries in an open letter** to him via her site. In the pithy entry, Baker questions Jeffries philosophy and insists his disregard for larger women sheds light on the deeper social issue at the core of this controversy, i.e. society’s distorted view of what is beautiful. Baker writes:

“Your opinion isn't shocking; millions share the same sentiment. You've used your wealth and public platform to echo what many already say. However, it's important you know that regardless of the numbers on your tax forms, your comments don't stop anyone from being who they are; the world is progressing in inclusive ways whether you deem it cool or not. The only thing you've done through your comments (about thin being beautiful and only offering XL and XXL in your stores for men) is reinforce the unoriginal concept that fat women are social failures, valueless, and undesirable. Your apology doesn't change this. Well, actually, that's not all you have done. You have also created an incredible opportunity for social change.”

What is even more powerful than Baker’s words, perhaps, is the inclusion of her own version of Abercrombie ads featuring herself as the model with the brand name switched to “Attractive & Fat.” The mock campaign gained considerable coverage, as it was reported by major news outlets, and is the ultimate reason why Jeffries was caught in the crossfire yet again for his controversial comments.



Abercrombie & Fitch vs. Attractive & Fat



Final Thought

The two examples covered in this blog demonstrate the unpredictable nature and true power of viral content. Executives at J.C. Penney, without question, couldn't have predicted that someone was going to compare one of their teapots to one of the most murderous men in history, just as Abercrombie CEO Jeffries didn't expect to wake up in 2013 to the controversial comments he made seven years ago.

References

Baker, Jes. The Militant Baker. "To: Mike Jeffries, c/o Abercrombie & Fitch."
<http://www.themilitantbaker.com/2013/05/to-mike-jeffries-co-abc-fitch.html>

Business Insider. "The Tea Kettle on this J.C. Penney Billboard Looks a Lot Like Hitler."
<http://www.businessinsider.com/hitler-teapot-on-jcpenney-billboard-2013-5>

Nudd, Tim. AdWeek. "Unable to Catch a Break, JC Penney Puts Up Billboard Showing Tea Kettle That Looks Like Hitler. <http://www.adweek.com/adfreak/unable-catch-break-jcpenney-puts-billboard-showing-tea-kettle-looks-hitler-149835>

Smith, Erika W. Fashion & Style. "Abercrombie & Fitch CEO Mike Jeffries Controversy Continues; Plus-Size Blogger Strikes Back in 'Attractive & Fat' Mock Campaign."

<http://www.fashionnstyle.com/articles/7360/20130528/abercrombie-fitch-ceo-mike-jeffries-controversy-continues-plus-size-blogger-strikes-back-attractive-fat-mock-campaign.htm>



441 N. 5th Street | Suite #104 | Philadelphia, PA 19123