

Selling It

Marketing Catastrophes of the Worst Kind

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Some companies will do anything to attract a consumer's attention, be it by splurging on expensive advertisements or by employing other public relations tactics and antics. Occasionally, however, even accomplished corporate executives can make decisions that are nothing less than unmitigated marketing disasters. Their campaign may attract truckloads of attention, but end up crippling the company instead of catapulting revenue. Onlookers are left to ponder, "What were they thinking?"

Read how carelessly worded ads and poorly conceived offers have cost large sums of money, plenty of embarrassment and even jobs.



A small-town car dealer was desperate for customers. He came up with a clever idea—or so he thought. He published an ad in the local newspapers promising that customers who brought him a pumpkin would be granted a dollar discount equal to the weight of the pumpkin. Someone who brought him a 100 pound pumpkin would receive a \$100 discount toward the purchase of a new car, and so forth.

Convinced that everyone who saw the advertisement would jump at the offer, the dealer sat back in his office and waited for customers to line up at his door. Sure enough, line up they did. There was just one problem: the car dealer hadn't spent much time researching pumpkins. He had no idea that local farms grew *extremely* heavy pumpkins—to the tune of several thousand pounds!

Residents flocked the surrounding pumpkin farms and chose the heaviest specimens

would cost him. Because it was a localized incident, that particular marketing failure did not draw much media coverage.

However, marketing disasters are not limited to small businesses by any means. When large corporations are involved, the media often trumpets the blunder, thereby multiplying the cost and shame many times over.

In America alone, hundreds of billions of dollars are spent on marketing each year. Advertising is one of the most commonly used forms of marketing. Huge marketing firms specialize in helping businesses come up with ideas, slogans and even new company names to help them attract the attention of potential clients. Competition among large companies is often cutthroat in nature, and ads or slogans that help one stand out can make all the difference.

Marketing, however, involves much more than just ads. Many companies look for other means to draw customers' interest.

or promotion. Often, foolish-sounding PR tactics score big returns, bringing in millions of dollars worth of business for a minimal investment. Sometimes, though, an apparently brilliant campaign turns into disaster and costs top executives their jobs. Even a single misplaced word in an ad can bring very costly results.

And then there is a category all its own: the marketing decisions that leave us gaping, wondering what the company officials drank before they adopted that particular idea.

Going Bananas

Every language has its own slang terms that come into popular use. They add color and character to writing and speech, offering a different nuance than the "correct" term. Many slang words are legitimate words that are used to replace the word that is really intended. Perhaps the English word with the most slang variations is "dollars," which can also be referred to as dough, greenbacks, bucks, bread—and even cabbage, lettuce, enchiladas and bananas!

For the most part, anyone schooled in local speech will understand and accept the slang word for what it is: a colorful and sometimes humorous reference to another word. Occasionally, however, people take a slang word at face value. The results can be remarkably unexpected.

In 1986, the Silo discount electronics chain published an ad announcing that it was selling its stereo systems for just 299 bananas. It hadn't occurred to company officials that people would take their offer literally. However, on the first day of the promotion, dozens of customers descended on Silo outlets in Seattle, Washington and El Paso carrying with them the requisite 299 bananas as payment for their purchase of a stereo. The hapless storeowners went... bananas.

The company was caught completely unprepared. The executives calculated that it would be best to accept the bananas and



A Silo outlet.



Silo was stuck with 11,000 bananas.



Even zoos had no use for thousands of free bananas.

swallow the loss. To have refused the fruit in payment could have brought negative publicity that was far more costly. The chain was forced to give away its stereo systems for approximately \$50 worth of bananas each.

Marketing is a powerful tool for expanding business. Especially among large corporations where the competition is heavy, advertising helps one company stand out among the others.

they could find. It wasn't long before the pumpkin discount was abruptly discontinued, and no explanation was necessary.

This incident is a classic example of a marketing disaster. The dealer thought that he had discovered a brilliant means of attracting customers, but he failed to calculate how much the promotional discount

For example, one beverage company that decided to expand its product line by selling ices erected a gigantic popsicle in the center of Manhattan. They hoped that the publicity generated would translate into huge sales.

A word of caution: marketing is nebulous. It is difficult to predict reliably how people will respond to a particular advertisement