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Expert Speak

Troll Marketing: Creating Buzz with Controversies

A disruptive yet somewhat controversial trend in marketing is that of troll marketing. If done well, troll marketing can create the right buzz. But if brands err and find themselves on the wrong side of the fine line of propriety, it can have its repercussions too. Lloyd Mathias, business leader, marketer, and strategist, discusses how marketers can make the best use of troll marketing as a strategy and grab the customers' attention, all while staying within bounds of propriety.

A recent trend that has caught on in the marketing space, is that of ‘troll marketing.’ Not the same as trolling, which comes with a negative connotation and can often be vicious, troll marketing is merely the use of provocative comments or remarks to create controversy and capture the attention of the audience, a phenomenon largely seen on social media nowadays.

Fundamentally, troll marketing is an opportunity where a brand or a business uses something topical and of mass interest, and passes a cheeky comment or a barb that is aimed to be disruptive. The target could be a competitor, another non-competing brand, a celebrity, or even the consumers themselves.

Troll marketing is a great way for brands to take potshots at one another, in a friendly manner and occasionally even at celebrities. In the Indian context, consider the likes of Zomato, Swiggy, and Myntra, who have used troll marketing effectively to create a buzz among their audience. Internationally, a great example is that of Burger King and McDonald’s, a rivalry that has given the consumers and audience many a laugh with their good-natured and creative trolling. Netflix and Spotify too have shown great ingenuity in forwarding the trend, trolling celebrities and users alike. All of these have managed to get the audience talking, if not applauding.

Not Just a Recent Phenomenon

Troll marketing in itself may be a new term that has emerged from the internet or digital economy, but the strategy itself is an old one. The fact that brands have used it to attract attention or to create controversy deliberately is an old ploy. A great example are the cola wars—the evergreen Pepsi versus Coca Cola rivalry. At various times, over the years, Pepsi, the challenger brand in the cola category, has taken clever potshots at Coca Cola, often without naming them but making their target obvious.

A memorable instance of this comes from the ICC Cricket World Cup of 1996, when Pepsi took on Coca Cola, which was the official sponsor of the event and who went to town about being the “Official Sponsor.” Pepsi turned this on its head, signing on the reigning cricket superstars doing ‘un-cricket’ like things and signing off with the tagline “Nothing official about it.” The campaign at once became a massive hit, and to date, most people associate the 1996 World Cup with

Pepsi than with Coca Cola. This also helped consolidate Pepsi's challenger brand status, that was part of the brand DNA.

What is Driving the New Trend?



“ Troll marketing comes easier for the digital-first brands largely because much of the charm of troll marketing is timing and being contextual or #trending in social media lingo.

In this sense, troll marketing has an element of moment marketing because it is the viral or trending moments on which brands are capitalising.

The rise of troll marketing as a trend, especially online, then can be attributed to the combination of two key drivers. One, consumers' preference for brands to be less formal and preachy in their communication, and two, brands are seeking higher attention and engagement by leveraging social media, which is where most people nowadays spend much of their time seeking information and entertainment.

First, about consumer preference: in the eighties and nineties, brand communication used to be typically one-way, confined largely to television, print, or radio. However, the new breed of younger consumers, younger millennials, and Gen Z,¹ prefer brands to constantly engage with them. The Gen Z desire a more

¹ Gen Z, or Generation Z, refers to people born between 1997 and 2012.

interactive relationship, where brands do not solely promote their products, but instead, foster a two-way exchange of ideas and opinions. Such a conversation is only possible when brands successfully capture the viewer's attention—by speaking their lingo—and elicit their active participation.

This shift in consumer preference ties closely to the second driver of troll marketing—social media. Since consumers want brands to be contemporary, relevant, and more conversational, brands are leveraging the increased prevalence of social media in order to garner attention. And what better way to do it than to create some kind of controversy on social media.

Brands have understood that pushing controversies as part of troll marketing also keeps the brand in public memory for a while. Anything that's controversial, attracts interest, gets talked about, or sparks a debate. This, in turn, gets shared on various platforms avidly and gathers a lot of attention, often turning viral. Sometimes, the audience pull themselves into the controversy by taking sides and making comments, creating a chain that keeps the issue alive, all of which benefits the brand. So, in this ecosystem, where digital and social media have become critical, where influencers are playing a big role, I think brands have an opportunity to employ troll marketing cleverly.

Finding the Balance



When done properly, it can pay great dividends, though one has to be extremely careful, because there is a fine line between making a cheeky comment and trolling, which can be taken amiss, and that can backfire.

Troll marketing can help brands gain an advantage in the digital world, but a brand has to tread very carefully.

Ensuring that one does not cross that boundary and create negative ripples is very critical and an important part of what good marketers should do.

Then how should marketing strategists proceed?

First, one must check whether the brand is ‘ready’ for troll marketing. Whatever comment they make has to be in keeping with the personality of the brand. For instance, in the case of a serious category such as medical or engineering systems, manufacturing, or the like, there is no place for troll marketing. Whereas for consumer categories, especially impulse categories or lifestyle categories, in my opinion, troll marketing can add value to the marketing outreach.

The second part concerns the ‘relevance’—what is the reason for getting into or commenting about a particular issue? If you don't have a relevant take, it is better to stay silent. It can be tempting for brands to dive into something a large part of their audience has been following, say a big sporting event like the Wimbledon finals. But if there is no context, the ploy can fall flat. In this, troll marketing has an interesting intersection with moment marketing, because in a sense, they both are playing on a certain current development. A great example of this is Amul, which has built a solid reputation for great contextual marketing from way back in the analogue era. Amul has an interesting take on the issue of the day, with the Amul girl and the “utterly-butterly delicious” tagline to comment or even light-heartedly troll through clever puns and innuendo.

The third part is that the strategy must seem ‘authentic.’ It should be in line with the brand’s voice and not a borrowed voice—it must reflect what the brand stands for.

“ To summarize then, brands need to keep in mind these three rules when deploying troll marketing—first, it should be in keeping with your brand’s personality; second, you should have something relevant to say; and third, make sure your approach is authentic.



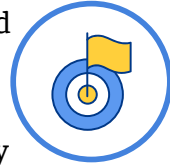
Following on from these, brands must make every attempt to keep their comments within a respectable and positive framework. It is indeed possible to be tongue in cheek without being nasty, bitter, or insulting. You can be cheeky, you might even take a minor swipe at a celebrity, but without really putting someone down or insulting them. The intent must be to avoid a massive backlash and tread carefully. The yardstick you should use is, would you want that comment about you or your brand? If the answer is no, then do not use it.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

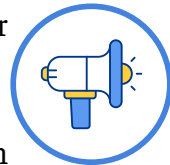
While navigating the fine line between troll marketing and trolling, brands must keenly recognize the pitfalls to avoid. To this extent, there are some additional things they can do.



The first is to recognize the right opportunities for their brand around trending topics. Don't troll randomly. To reiterate what I said earlier, have a perspective that is relevant to your brand and your audience. Let's say, your audience is based in cities which are plagued by monsoon woes. You can have witty takes on the monsoons that resonate with the audience but avoid poking fun at people's miseries.



Secondly, use the language and tone of your audience. If your customers are more comfortable with memes or videos, create content accordingly to communicate. Explore the medium they are most comfortable with and reach out in ways that will make them more amenable to engaging with you.



Thirdly, don't be a bully. The moment you cease being civil and become nasty, you cross the line into being a bully and that is completely avoidable. Simply put, avoid taking on individuals when troll marketing. One can afford to be a little cheeky, but when you pit a brand or a corporation against an individual, you can be sure that the sympathy will lie with the latter, no matter the intent.



And lastly, focus on topics that are debatable but not polarising. Aim to open up a topic for debate, which will engage the audience but not create polarisation. Avoid topics where people have sharp, emotive views, as that can create backlash for your brand. All said and done, some backlash will always be a part and parcel of troll marketing, or any marketing strategy. This is why brands need to be mindful of their communication otherwise they might find themselves in a hellhole which will not be desirable.



Of course, there is still no guarantee that nothing will go wrong. If even a single person creates enough of a splash, putting a negative spin on a perfectly well-meaning marketing strategy, that is enough to generate the wrong kind of publicity. I think that's inevitable in the digital economy and the world we live in, which is why I emphasize on always having a crisis management team at hand to tackle such issues.

A Word of Advice

Whether by intent or otherwise, brands end up shaping culture. How brands put out communication, what they show and communicate in advertisements is a stylised reflection of the real world and it also influences people to imitate them. These put added responsibility on the brands, and they cannot walk away from it.

Thus, troll marketing can be interpreted simply as a brand commenting on an issue that is not strictly within its domain. In a way, the brand is infringing upon the public space and how they navigate this is going to be closely watched by consumers.

Hence, brands need to be ultra-careful about their reputation when delving into troll marketing. Stay consistent with what your brand and company stand for and take into account your consumers. That is all it takes to create the right kind of attention that will keep you in the minds of the public for longer.

Lloyd Mathias is a business leader, marketer, and strategist with Asia-wide expertise. Formerly the Asia-Pacific Marketing Head for HP Inc., he has held senior leadership roles across the consumer, telecom, and technology domains. In previous roles, he has been the President and CMO of Tata Docomo, Country Sales Director for Motorola, and Executive VP Marketing and Category Director for PepsiCo India and South Asia.