

Being Talked about Is Not Always Good for Brands

by Ramanathan Vythilingam

Being talked about isn't always a win. Explore when talkability helps brands grow and how to plan campaigns that drive results.

At the time of writing this article, the American Eagle campaign of 2025, featuring Syndey Sweeney, which got a lot of negative attention has been exonerated. They seemed to have benefited from all the talkability around the campaign, with exceedingly good results on overall sales and new buyer acquisition ([link](#)). This is in sharp contrast to many other campaigns we have seen over the years, where negative social media conversations, got the Brands' to capitulate - withdraw the campaign, issue apologies etc – think Budweiser Light ([link](#)), Pepsi ([link](#)) and many more.

This is an interesting topic to unpack across a few dimensions – what causes some campaigns to be discussed and dissected in the public domain, and is this good or bad from a business standpoint?

What Is the Current State of Advertising?

We live in a world where anyone with a smartphone and a social media account (which is literally everyone), can have their opinions heard. This combined with a hyper-sensitive environment, means that Brands are constantly facing the Sophie's Choice – 'damned if you do, damned if you don't'.

Not surprisingly, "...92% of CMOs feel concerned about brand backlash when planning marketing activities." ([link](#)).

Such an environment is definitely not conducive for creativity to flourish – especially when we think of creativity as "...challenging established norms...". So, most teams are avoiding even the most mildly provocative stories – because they are worried about the backlash that can very quickly stem from some contrived negative narrative. The result, then is content that is totally banal, that steers away from any sort of polarization, something that no one can fault.

In itself, this is not wrong – but when it happens at this scale, it can be argued that this is resulting in the sea of sameness, where within each category, every Brand is playing to the same tropes, and we have quickly gravitated to the average ([link](#)). Advertising is just not surprising or interesting any more – which has also been captured well in the 'Crisis of Creative Effectiveness' published by the IPA ([link](#)).

So, there is merit in designing brand campaigns to be talked about – as it means the campaign was noticed, generated sufficient interest so people overcame their inertia and decided to react in some form – like/dislike, share, comment. As they say in showbiz "...the worst thing is not being talked about...".

What is in it for Brands - Earned Media

Before we discuss why certain campaigns get dissected in social media, we need to understand the driving motivation for brand and creative teams to create a talkable campaign.

We live in a world of content excess, and it is increasingly hard for advertising content to cut through the clutter and be seen. In such a scenario, Brands are spending more money – both in terms of amount of content created and the media spend that is needed to support the campaigns. The concept of earned media started to gain popularity around 2014 and is used to capture the idea of – value generated by third parties, without the brand paying for coverage. This is the phenomenon of people engaging with content that resonated with them – liking, sharing, commenting - thereby increasing the reach of the content. Also, called Shared media, this is in sharp contrast to Paid Media, where Brands pay for content to reach a target audience.

The idea of achieving reach, without paying for it, is compelling to any Marketer. And this has led to many a campaign being created with the express purpose of driving talkability/shareability and hence, earned media.

While the concept of earning free media reach is intuitive and compelling, the calculation of the dollar value to this ‘earned reach and engagement’ has been vague. Even today there is no industry standard approach to defining what constitutes earned media and how to assign a dollar value, to the impact that accrues to the business as a result. And to further cement how ambiguous it is - earned media is almost always the sole justification included in the cases submitted for awards ([link](#)) – and this has seen its fair share of challenges in 2025.

So, attention grabbing headlines like “...Nike’s Colin Kaepernick ad created \$163.5 million in buzz...” ([link](#)), are at best a subjective view – as the approach used to compute this dollar value is never known. This limits comparability across campaigns and makes it difficult to justify any strategy that has the express intent to generate Earned media.

So, there is a clear need for brands to carefully consider the approach to design campaigns to become ‘talkable’, and it has to be done in a manner that positively impacts the brands’ business.

Is Being Talked About, Always a Good Thing?

There is an interesting paradox, that in a world where most [Brand advertising](#) is actively avoided, rarely seen, much less engaged with, it is fairly easy to get talked about. Given that people are more likely to engage with content that makes them feel strong emotions, content around provocative topics, like cultural and social stereotypes, diversity and inclusion, social and political issues are all opportunistic spaces.

Our dopamine response levels are constantly being recalibrated by the endless stream of content and stimulation – which means more extreme provocative narratives will be needed just to register a reaction. If Brands have a single-minded intention to register on the provocative scale, they risk alienating people, and more importantly, spending scarce resources on advertising that will do nothing for the brand.

So, the best campaigns will always be ones where the topic chosen by the [Brand](#) to take a stand for or against, is intrinsically linked with the product category. Brands must ensure an intrinsic link where the product resolves a tension or resolving a tension, results in a better product experience. Examples include Essity’s campaign to normalize periods and feminine hygiene and Dove’s long running campaign for Real Beauty.

Beware What You Wish For, Because It Can Come True!

Brands can design narratives to provoke a reaction, like Nike's Colin Kaepernick campaign, or as in the case of American Eagle, have the unintended consequence of generating online debate. There have been many examples, where campaigns ended up on the wrong end of the social media discourse, even when the brands never intended it. A campaign for Dove in 2017 was mired in controversy, when 3-4 seconds in the middle of the video were screen-grabbed and a narrative spun out of it.



Source : *The scenes that featured a black woman who changed to a white woman* ([link](#)).

And more recently, the American Eagle campaign featuring Sydney Sweeney, got caught in a discourse around eugenics – given an imaginative narrative, where ‘jeans’ was conflated with ‘genes’ ([link](#)).

So, irrespective of the idea or the execution that gets trolled, we live in times where advertising is subject to polysemic viewpoints – different interpretations of meaning in different segments of the audience. And the potential upside of talkability can very quickly be negated by the downside of a backlash – with a thin red line separating the two.

Navigating Social Sentiment

No brand wants to be trolled on social media, especially given how quickly the negativity can spread in online forums - all businesses would want to avoid/minimize this. So, what's the playbook for brands navigating negative social sentiment, whether anticipated or unintended?

The first consideration is the space the campaign is anchored in – is this relevant to the brand/category? Does the brand have a legitimacy to talk about the issue that is being highlighted? There has to be a clear link to the product category. Some good examples are:

- A beauty brand that challenges the unrealistic expectations set by the beauty industry (Dove)
- A clothing brand that challenges the growth of fast fashion and its impact on the environment (Patagonia)
- A chocolate brand that wants to bring attention to exploitation in the cocoa supply chain (Tony Choccolony)
- A feminine hygiene brand that wants to normalize conversations around intimate health and hygiene (Essity)

And in all these instances, resolution of the tension, results in a better product experience for consumers.

The second consideration is to monitor the sentiment of social media conversations happening around the campaign. This provides a clear data-driven, decision-making framework for what to do in such situations. Using the proportion of negative/positive sentiment, we can decide if the campaign generated alienation or polarization. Alienation will be a scenario where the social media comments are predominantly negative; while Polarization will be characterized by equal parts negative and positive sentiment – the campaign will have its detractors, but also supporters.

We can plot campaign examples on this 2 by 2 quadrant:

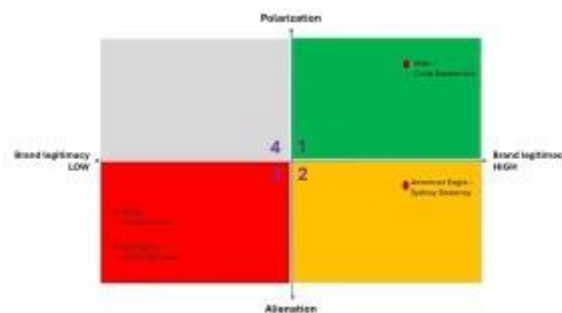


Figure – Consideration framework for Brands to navigate social sentiment

- The Pepsi's campaign featuring Kendall Jenner, that aired around the time of the Black Lives Matter movement in the US ([link](#)) is an example, of a campaign where the brand had no legitimacy to play in and the social media response was quick, large and predominantly negative. As did the campaign by Bud Light in partnership with Dylan Mulvaney ([link](#)).
- The American Eagle ad featuring Sydney Sweeney, is a campaign where the brand had legitimacy to play and saw some negative sentiment, but at much lower levels and much later in the campaign timeline.
- The Nike campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick, is a campaign where the brand has legitimacy to play and saw a polarized response (in equal measures positive and negative sentiment).

Depending on which quadrant a brand finds their campaign in, there are implications to what they can do:

- **Quadrant 1** – this is ideal, a legitimate position taken by the brand and generates a polarized response. Here brands should lean into the narrative, actively promoting the positive voices and countering the negative ones, to further gain more earned media.
- **Quadrant 2** – this would be unexpected situations where brands can find themselves, despite having the legitimacy to play in and/or having no agenda to drive talkability. Response will depend on the levels of negative sentiment:
 - a. **Do-nothing scenario:** Low proportion of negativity and the quantity of conversations do not increase over time, means it does not merit a response.



Brands should have confidence in their strategy and stick to the intended plans (much like what American Eagle did).

- b. **Move-on scenario:** There will be times, despite the legitimacy of the brand, the conversation can take a life of its own. There could be high levels of negative sentiment, with increasing volume of conversations – which can get very distracting and it would be prudent for brands to cut their losses and move on to better things (like Dove did with their campaign).
- **Quadrant 3** – this is definitely not the place where brands want to be. They have no legitimacy to play here, and their activation is actively derided. Usually this is because the brands are trying something new, like Bud Light and it has backfired. The brand response in this scenario is to apologize and revert back to their brand positioning from before.
- **Quadrant 4** – we will rarely see campaigns here, where the brand is out of its depth yet gets positive affirmation in social media.

In Summary

The single biggest consideration for brands should be to ensure their legitimacy in championing the topic or idea. It must never be about getting talked about, at the expense of everything else. Very few brand campaigns do this well – because inherently, it is difficult for most brands to find a link between what their product does and hence drives brand choice and a profitable business – with a topic that can be made provocative and talkable.

Majority of advertising will not be talked about, but they still will be effective - if they are built considering the context of the media channel in which they will be deployed and the content consumption behavior therein.

As a default, it is more likely for brand campaigns to face negative social media attention than see positive appreciation – as it is the vocal minority who are more likely to voice their disapproval. So, brands do need to keep this in mind. When brands have an active social listening in place, they can map out the longitudinal trend of sentiment over time and arrive at benchmarks for proportion of positive and negative sentiment.

Using this, they can monitor the trend of sentiment to a new campaign – both in terms of absolute levels, as well as growth over time. This allows the brand to decide the quadrant where their campaign falls and what they need to potentially do.