Case Study: Dove Campaign for Real Beauty

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Introduction

The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty was launched in 2004, following a major international study that sparked interest and conversation about the need for a wider definition of beauty. This study, *The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report*, found that only 2 percent of women around the world describe themselves as beautiful, proving the hypothesis that the definition of beauty had become unachievable. Since the campaign started in 2004, Dove has applied several different communication tools to challenge the various beauty stereotypes and achieve their goal of widening the definition of beauty through discussion and debate (“The Dove Campaign”).

We decided on this case because we found it extremely interesting. Dove is known for featuring “real women with real bodies and real curves” (“The Dove Campaign”). As young women, we felt that we could understand and relate to these real women involved in the campaign. We also felt that Dove does a great job of relaying their message and relating to the public by encouraging people to think more positively about themselves. With the increasing pressure and prominence that society puts on being beautiful, Dove is able to show the reality of beauty through their campaign, further proving that there is beauty in everyone.

The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty most closely relates to consumer relations. Consumer relations can often be confused with marketing, but PR and marketing share a few fundamental concepts: research, publics, communication and action plan, and evaluation. While PR and marketing both support the sales function, PR is more concerned with building relationships with their customers and stakeholders in the organization (Center, Jackson, Smtih, & Stansberry, 2014). Dove does this by using real women, rather than actors, to help customers
feel more comfortable and better relate to their products. This, in turn, allows Dove to build a strong base of customers who then become regular and loyal.

**Research**

Back in 2004 before the campaign started, beauty was a very narrow-minded idea. Dove was concerned that this “limited portrayal of beauty was preventing women from recognizing and enjoying beauty in themselves and others” (Etcoff, Orbach, Scott, & D’Agostino, 2004). This was the overarching issue that prompted Dove to launch their study, *The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report*. This study explored what beauty means to women today and why they feel the way they do. Through the study, Dove was able to analyze women’s relationships to their own beauty, as well as the perceptions of how beauty is portrayed in popular culture (Etcoff et al., 2004).

Dove is one of the many organizational brands run by Unilever, a multinational consumer goods company that owns over 400 brands in the categories of food, refreshment, home care and personal care. Dove began back in 1957 in the United States with the “revolutionary new beauty cleansing bar” (Unilever: Dove). Today, Dove offers a variety of products including body washes, hand and body lotions, facial cleansers, deodorants, shampoos, conditioners and hair styling products for both men and women. The social mission of Dove is to widen the definition of beauty and ensure that women have a positive relationship with the way they look and feel (Unilever: Dove).

The main publics both involved in and effected by this campaign include women and girls. The target age range is quite broad, spanning from young, 14-year-old teenage girls, to older, 65-year-old women.
Strategy

Dove’s website states, “Dove always aims to deliver products which tangibly improve the condition of skin or hair and give a pleasurable experience of care, because when you look and feel beautiful, it makes you feel happier. It’s a feeling every woman should experience every day.” They also state that, “Real beauty embraces diversity – no woman is or should feel excluded from the world of beauty that the brand represents. Real women are the brand’s true inspiration.” In analyzing the body issues that women have, Dove found that only 2 percent of women around the world describe themselves as beautiful (“The Dove Campaign”). In order to put their objectives of sparking interest and widening the definition of beauty into action, Dove planned their Real Beauty campaign to combat the insecurities of women. They did so by communicating to the target audience of women throughout the world.

Dove markets their products toward women in the first place, so in order to further their communication with them, Dove used real women as their spokespeople. Their strategy is to appeal to the emotional side of women. All of their videos are very touching and relatable for most women. Their strategy is also to use “real” women in their advertising. This gives a more personal feel to the campaign rather than using celebrities, who can be hard to relate to. As a group, we would keep their strategy the same because of how well it has worked for them in the last 12 years. Using TV, print, billboards and social media proved successful to Dove.

Tactics

In phase one of the campaign, starting in 2004, Dove launched advertisements in which women could vote to see whether they had a positive or negative outlook, called “tick box” billboards. For example, one ad had an image of a woman with age spots. The voting options
were either beauty spots, or age spots. The audience could cast their votes online (Bahadur, 2014). The most iconic part of the campaign began in 2005 with the advertisement of women standing in their underwear stating, “Do you think that real beauty comes in many shapes and sizes?” (Bahadur, 2014). The advertisement put a very effective image out to the public showing that women are indeed beautiful even though they are not extremely thin like super models.

In 2006, models in Spain were banned for being too thin. Dove was able to respond to the crisis by releasing their first film featuring a model who undergoes extensive makeup and Photoshop before finally being put on a billboard appearing as a completely different person. The ad says, “No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted. Take part in the Dove Real Beauty Workshops for Girls” (Dove US, 2014).

Next, in 2007, Dove started their third stage of the campaign by focusing on women ages 50-64 (“The Dove Campaign”). They used print media to reach this audience. The message was conveyed through print media advertisements in magazines and newspapers, as well as on social media with images of the middle-aged women photographed by photographer Annie Leibovitz. Later in 2008 they did a TV advertisement for their ProAge line featuring barely covered older women (“The Dove Campaign”). The images and videos capture the beauty of aging and stand out among all the other typical advertisements consisting of 20 year olds.

In 2010, Dove began their movement for self-esteem. They include multiple CSR initiatives in the campaign to connect with their publics. The movement allows girls to be mentored. They partnered with Girl Scouts of America, Girls, Inc. and Boys & Girls Clubs of America to help get the movement going (“The Dove Campaign”).

Dove then moved towards more candid type advertising with their Real Beauty sketches and the Choose Beautiful videos. In 2013, Dove released the Real Beauty sketches in which an
FBI Trained Forensic artist had the women describe their own features while he drew what he heard. Then, another woman would describe the same woman’s features and he would draw a separate picture. They later come to see that the drawing they described themselves in was much less attractive than the drawing that someone else described them. This video now has over 66 million views on YouTube and started major conversation on Facebook and Twitter (Dove US, 2013). The Dove Choose Beautiful video also went viral last year, but was not viewed nearly as many times as the sketches video.

Some people are starting to feel like Dove is done doing the “candid” type videos and feminists are starting to attack the campaign. The Guardian says that Dove “has mastered the art of passing off somewhat passive-aggressive and patronizing advertising as super-empowering, ultra PR-able social commentary” (Chumsky, 2015). PR Newser thinks that it is time for Dove to put an end to their Real Beauty campaign. They said that, “What started off as a campaign about the state of beauty marketing has turned into a series of PSAs on self-esteem with the women participants put in the position to account for their feelings in what feels like a melodramatic skit” (Garcia, 2015).

On the other hand, the majority of publics have received the campaign positively. Financial reports can confirm that the campaign has been received well by the publics. Nazgûl Fool, a YouTube account, commented on the sketches video saying, “By no means am I sensitive or anything. But I have always loathed how I look. This video was really touching. My mom always says ‘I wish you saw yourself the way everyone else does.’ This video reminds me of that every time I see it. Love Dove” (Dove US, 2014). Social media conversation also shows the love that the publics have gained for the company. Fortune reports that in 10 years, the campaign
increased sales from $2.5 billion to $4 billion in 2014. Dove has also been named the best advertising campaign of the 21st century by Ad Age (Chumsky, 2015).

We agree with the tactics that Dove used. They were able to have many viral videos, iconic advertisements and a now 12-year-old campaign that is still going strong. There is no denying that Dove used incredible tactics through TV, social media and print media to convey the message about beauty. The one flaw that Dove has is their Instagram page. It is incredibly feminine and does not mention much about their products; however, they do answer customer complaints and compliments almost immediately and with personalized responses. Dove is on top of their social media and encourages two-way communication.

**Evaluation/Continuation**

Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty has now been a success for more than 10 years. Sharon MacLeod, vice president of Unilever North America Personal Care, told the Huffington Post, “The conversation is as relevant today as it was 10 years ago…I believe we’ll be doing [this campaign] 10 years from now” (Bahadur, 2014).

Campaigns vary in length according to the type of product, service or message being promoted. New product or service campaigns may last for three to six months, while large businesses with years of experience can keep a campaign fresh for six to nine months (Palo Alto Software). Dove’s current campaign has focused on changing women’s attitudes and perceptions toward the definition of beauty, but many wonder if Dove is sending the right message or if it should be taken in a new direction.

The company provided an online Dove Self-Esteem Toolkit to help build girls’ self-esteem. The toolkit is complete with videos, guides, activities and workshops girls can refer to
and use when needed. Self-esteem is linked to body image; therefore, building young girls’ self-esteem while they are young will hopefully change their definition of beauty and allow them to love their bodies as they grow older. According to an article on The Inquisitive Mind, “Research has shown that the internalization of the thin ideal can occur as early as three years old…” (Celbre & Denton, 2014). Dove recognizes these types of issues and aims to end poor body image before it becomes a major issue in the lives of young girls. Unfortunately, today’s society throws edited images in the faces of girls and women of all ages. Dove has tackled this issue by creating videos showing the process that photos go through as women are shaped, toned and tanned to become a “worthy” billboard image. The company should continue this campaign, but slowly begin to phase it out and transition to either a new issue, or tackle the same issue in an innovative way.

The goal in creating the Campaign for Real Beauty was to start a global conversation with women about their attitudes and perceptions toward beauty. Women all over the world have different views on what is beautiful, what it looks like, who exemplifies beauty, etc. As aforementioned, this campaign, while successful, has been running for a little over 10 years. Each video Dove puts out captures the attention of millions of women and girls across the globe. One critic stated that Dove’s focus on beauty was wrong and suggested they focus on judging one another based on the beauty of intelligence, ethical sensibility and wit. Other critics have claimed Dove’s message is in direct conflict with their products (Celbre & Denton, 2014).

Dove’s parent company, Unilever, also owns Axe, Slimfast and Fair & Lovely. These brands are typically associated with sex appeal, weight loss and wrinkle-reducing skin creams. Dove is distinctly separated from these brands in terms of products and the messages being conveyed. It
might be a good idea for Dove to try incorporating some new attributes to aspire to in their campaign.

**Case Analysis/Conclusion**

Dove’s Campaign for Real Beauty is carefully crafted and quite successful. Each video and advertisement that hits the Internet captures the attention of men, women and children across the globe. Dove has found a way to connect with their target audience, and they continue to keep the global conversation fresh.

When Dove began their campaign, they started the conversation by creating “tick box” billboards. These billboards featured a picture of a woman with two options such as ‘grey’ or ‘gorgeous.’ People could then send in their votes to Dove and the percentage appeared on the billboard. This strategy was the first sign of affirmation that Dove was on the right track. The company began to use ‘real’ women in their campaign. A photo was posted of several women with various body types in their bras and underwear. The women featured in the photo did not fit the stereotypical version of beauty, leading women to challenge society’s definition of beauty. Some of these women were asked to come on talk shows, such as The View, and share their stories. Women were able to relate to what they were seeing instead of feeling inferior or not good enough.

The company has excellent videos conveying their campaign messages as well. One of their most well-known videos, “Evolution,” received over 1.7 million views in its first month (Celebre & Denton, 2014). “Evolution” went viral before going viral was a big deal. The “Real Beauty Sketches” video has received over 6 million views on YouTube and was posted three years ago. These videos are still relevant to the culture and Dove’s campaign; therefore, they are
still being widely circulated on the web. Dove designed their videos and commercials to make women feel better about their bodies and change their perception of beauty.

Dove is continually making its mark in the conversation about beauty, leaving change in its wake. Should the company continue the Campaign for Real Beauty, the messages need to be fresh and relevant to issues concerning beauty all over the world. Transitioning the message to one of internal beauty and intelligence would only continue to benefit the company, brand loyalty and brand love.
References


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