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## 'The coffee cup moment': What business leaders can learn from a Game of Thrones blunder

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By Zaib Shadani



A Game of Thrones blooper provided Starbucks with a \$2.3bn Winterfell windfall, demonstrating a valuable lesson in the power of agile marketing, writes Zaib Shadani, managing director of Shadani Consulting



We may finally be about to learn who sits on the Iron Throne, but the real winner of Game of Thrones is coffee chain Starbucks, after a misplaced coffee cup was seen next to Daenerys Targaryan in episode 4 of the final season.

While unnoticed by hundreds of cast and crew, fans were quick to spot the oversight and acted swiftly, taking to social media, chat rooms, making memes and ultimately causing the coffee cup gaffe to go viral.

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The cup may have only appeared on screen for a few seconds, but it is estimated that it earned Starbucks in excess of \$2.3 billion (AED8.4bn) in free publicity and advertising. This figure however, does not even begin to reflect all the social media, on and offline-chatter or word of mouth traction that has resulted.

Ironically, it wasn't even a Starbucks coffee cup in the scene, but with fans speculating and being swift to share their feedback, Starbucks is clearly the victor of this blunder.



Budgeted at around \$90 million, Game of Thrones is one of the most expensive and popular shows on the planet. It's worthy of 'Super Bowl' status and Starbucks just received prime time product placement for free – but it begs the question, did Starbucks leverage this windfall and secure maximum PR mileage?

As communications specialists, we are always looking at ways to cultivate positive word of word, engage in reputation management and secure opportunities for customer conversation that will ultimately result in positive brand positioning and increased sales traffic.

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In this particular instance Starbucks made a surprise cameo in one of the world's highest rated TV shows – a show which is a global phenomenon with a global audience and thus, offers an opportunity for global impact on Starbucks' PR efforts and subsequently, sales figures.



From a PR perspective, this is a goldmine for Starbucks and will go down in history as a blooper that reaped in excess of \$2.3 billion. However, there are a few touch points where Starbucks excelled and a few areas where they could have amplified their PR efforts.

Social media is a great platform for direct real time PR and communications, offering opportunities for open and dynamic interaction between brands and consumers. One such opportunity presented itself to Starbucks when asked by a follower on Twitter:

"What do dragons drink, anyway?" Starbucks responded: "Whatever they want".

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Followed by a second tweet that said: "TBH we're surprised she didn't order a Dragon Drink". This comment is perfection – it's witty, cheeky and directly promotes the Starbucks Dragon Drink, even though the Dragon Drink has nothing to do with Game of Thrones and is named after its core ingredient, Dragon fruit.

The result was a whopping 79,000 likes and 22,300 retweets on this tweet alone, as well as the story being picked up by both local and international press. While we aren't privy to the sales figures of Dragon Drink, it would be reasonable to assume that awareness and demand for the Dragon Drink was positively impacted by this twitter exchange.



In an age when effective PR is a combination of traditional forms of communication (such as print, broadcast press, social and digital platforms), it is important to ensure that the core messaging and 'tone' of the brand remain consistent so that that no matter the medium, the brand is always protected and falls in line with customer expectations. From a timing perspective, it is important to actively promote your range of products or services when there is maximum interest.

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With regards to season 8, there was an insatiable amount of interest in what the coffee cup was doing in that scene. Throw into the mix the fact that HBO acknowledged the coffee cup incident and offered a response that Daenerys preferred "herbal tea" is an opportunity that Starbucks could have seized and used as a great segue to showcasing Starbucks' extensive tea range and offer GoT fans the option to drink away the woes of Westeros.

Moreover, Starbucks could also have piggybacked on the HBO statement and asked people to guess Daenerys' choice of drink from the Starbucks tea menu, ensuring that customers remained engaged and conversation continued into the various tea options at Starbucks.

The biggest surprise however, is that despite all the interest, Starbucks hasn't launched a limited edition coffee drink inspired by Game of Thrones. With over an estimated 16 million global followers of the recent Game of Thrones episodes alone, there are potentially hundreds of thousands of fans who would order a Lannister latte, Targaryen tea or even a King Slayer cappuccino to show solidarity with their favourite characters. From using foam art to promote drinks to House Targaryen branded coffee sleeves, the opportunities for Starbucks are limitless.

Nonetheless, the fact remains that Starbucks has reaped billions in free advertising and PR and will go down in TV history as the undisputed winner in a very public on-screen blunder, that led to a massive Winterfell windfall.

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