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# Reese Witherspoon's PR mess is why brands shouldn't force themselves into the Covid-19 conversation

Draper James' inability to fulfil their promise, mismanagement of the fallout and failure to placate disillusioned teachers is a lesson in the importance of PR planning



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By Zaib Shadani



Zaib Shadani – PR consultant and media trainer at Shadani Consulting

Draper James, Reese Witherspoon’s lifestyle brand finds itself in the middle of a PR disaster after they announced that they would be giving away free dresses to teachers during Covid-19.

As shared on their Instagram page “We want to say thank you. During quarantine, we see you working harder than ever to educate our children. To show our gratitude, Draper James would like to give teachers a free dress” and teachers simply had to fill out a form to submit their nomination. The initiative was picked up by major news outlets and touted as a beacon of hope and positivity, but all that changed almost overnight.



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The problem was that Draper James had jumped on the Covid-19 CSR bandwagon too fast, without thinking through the campaign or the financial implications.

In reality, Draper James only had the capacity to give away 250 dresses – a major issue in light of the fact that they received over 1 million applicants.

To make matters worse, Draper James captured the email addresses of all the teachers who had submitted their nominations and started bombarding them with promotional offers, discounts and trying to sell dresses. Not only did they fail in delivering on their promise of free dresses, but they also started spamming the same people, they had disappointed.

Draper James’ inability to fulfil their promise, mismanagement of the fallout and failure to placate disillusioned teachers is a lesson in the importance of PR planning, crisis communications and avoiding the urge to be part of a conversation because ‘everyone else is doing it’. As well-intentioned as the campaign may have been, by the end of it, many felt it was a PR ploy and a half-hearted attempt to be part of the Covid-19 conversation. Here are the top tips that brands should avoid when in a crisis situation.

## This is not an engagement opportunity

The Coronavirus pandemic is not an opportunity to revisit your mailing list or try to unnecessarily interact with customers and force yourself into a conversation. It’s inappropriate and will damage your brand equity and customer perception in the long run. If you do have something to add to the conversation, think it through, weigh the pro’s and con’s and don’t underestimate the ability of the end consumer in seeing through a PR ploy or attempt to interject your brand into the Covid-19 conversation.

## Don't spam people

If you are contacting customers, it should be because you have something valuable to say. Don’t clog people’s inboxes with generic Covid-19 emails or discount offers on irrelevant items that are not adding any value or even worse, end up annoying customers. Restrict your emails to those that will be of genuine benefit to the customers at this time, for e.g. free access to something, and focus on customers that you have a current and active relationship with.



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## Focus on creating good will - not hard selling

People will not support a company they feel is benefitting from their suffering, so it’s a delicate balance between responsible marketing and profiteering. Use this time wisely to build real relationships with customers and gain their loyalty, and don’t try to upsell. Quite the opposite, this is a time to be showing customers that you care, and are doing everything possible to help ease the difficult situation: focus on fostering goodwill and not upselling.

## Avoid knee-jerk reactions

It’s natural to have a panic-driven reaction, but let cooler heads prevail. Take time to evaluate your business needs and strategize the next steps, rather than rushing into a hasty decision. Some businesses have been quick to make Covid-19 statements, while others are going completely dark on their communication. Both are counter-productive in the long run, if not backed up with a rational and long-term game plan that makes sense and can be executed with the resources at hand.

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