

Bud Light, “Up For Whatever”: Final Case Analysis

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I. Synopsis of the Case

A. Background

Bud Light Beer is an American-based brewery company known for making the most popular beer in the United States (History of Anheuser-Busch). Bud Light was created in 1982 by its parent company, Anheuser Busch, which was founded in 1861 by Eberhard Anheuser and Adolphus Busch (History of Anheuser-Busch). Bud Light’s primary mission is “to be at the forefront of innovation and expand their product portfolio, offering a wide range of brewed products to meet the ever-changing preferences of their customers” (History of Anheuser-Busch). Although beer is very popular in the United States, it had a 7.2% decrease in total sales from 1999 to 2013 (Shultz, 2013). This is causing many beer companies, like Bud Light, to either merge with other companies or attempt to expand their target publics to increase total sales through interactive campaigns.

In September of 2013, Bud Light launched their “Up For Whatever” campaign (Guardian, 2015). The campaign’s focus was on expanding their target audience to encompass millennials, those born between 1981 and 1996 (Taylor, 2016). Bud Light directed their marketing toward the millennial generation because they have a strong buying power, and the majority are consumers of craft beer (Taylor, 2016). In fact, a research study found that in 2013, 44% of 21 to 27-year-old drinkers had never tried Bud Light (Shultz, 2013). Therefore, the “Up For Whatever” campaign was intended to associate Bud Light Beer with exciting, fun nights with friends to expand their target audience (Guardian, 2015). Bud Light utilized various marketing strategies throughout their campaign. The company was very interactive on social media and encouraged consumers to use the hashtag #Upforwhatever to display their carefree attitude. As a result of the popularity of the hashtag, the campaign went viral across all social

media platforms. In addition, Bud Light utilized new advertising on their individual beers to promote the campaign.

B. The Situation

In April 2015, Bud Light promoted their “Up For Whatever” campaign by modernizing their beer labels with new advertisements. The beer labels advertised 140 different slogans including one that read “The perfect beer for removing ‘no’ from your vocabulary for the night” followed by the hashtag #Upforwhatever (Storm, 2015). Thousands of Bud Light beer bottles featured these advertisements. The campaign provoked controversy on social media, with strident criticism accusing Bud Light of promoting rape culture, sexual assault, and the concept of irresponsible drinking. The word “no” is generally connotated with rape awareness and prevention. For example, the phrase “no means no” is generally used to promote the concept of sexual consent. Therefore, Bud Light received critical backlash on social media for promoting the removal of the word “no” from people’s vocabulary when they are in a vulnerable, intoxicated state. As a result, Bud Light’s new beer labels posed an ethical crisis for the company because they promoted irresponsible behavior.

C. Key Publics

There are various internal and external key publics in Bud Light’s “Up For Whatever” campaign. For instance, the internal publics include all the employees at Bud Light and Anheuser Busch, the parent company. The employees are vital internal publics because they are the ones responsible for the creating and approving the advertisements in the campaign. There are also various external key publics including consumers, communities, and investors. Bud Light’s key target consumers are millennials, specifically those 21-30 years of age in 2013 who have a moderate to high income (Hair et al., 2016). In addition, there are various activist communities

who are anti-sexual assault who play an important role in this crisis. For instance, they advocate for sexual consent and actively use the phrase “no means no,” to promote safe, responsible behavior. Therefore, when Bud Light advertised the removal of the word “no” on their beer labels, these communities were inherently affected because their core purpose is it to promote the importance of the word “no” in all situations. Lastly, a key external public is investors in Anheuser Busch, both current and prospective. Current investors are crucial publics during a crisis because they are the lifeline of the company and therefore, need to be considered when the issues are being addressed. If investors are dismissed during a crisis or don’t agree as to how a company is handling the situation, they can ultimately withdraw their money harming the company. Lastly, prospective investors are also important during a crisis because they may not want to invest in the company if they don’t agree with how the PR team handles the situation.

D. Timeline

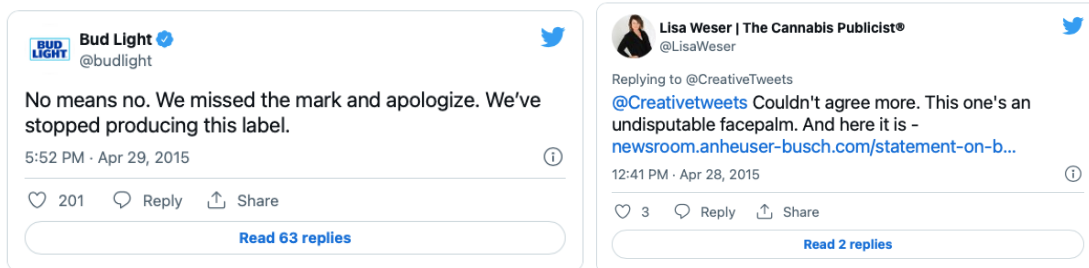
- September 2013: Bud Light launched their “Up For Whatever” campaign in the United States. (Guardian, 2015).
- April 27, 2015: A Reddit user posted a picture of a Bud Light beer bottle that advertised the new label with the slogan, “The perfect beer for removing ‘no’ from your vocabulary for the night” (Hall, 2018).
- April 27, 2015: The hashtag #NoMeansNo goes viral across all social media platforms and people began criticizing the slogan saying it’s “tone deaf” and calling Bud Light the “worst beer on the face of the planet” (Anderson, 2015).
- April 27, 2015: Major news outlets such as Forbes, Adweek, The Washington Post, and The New York Times began reporting the crisis.

- April 28, 2015: Bud Light’s Vice President, Alexander Lambrecht, released a formal statement on the company website acknowledging the company’s mistake. The same statement was also posted on Bud Light’s Twitter account (Hall, 2018).
- April 28, 2015: Lisa Weser, U.S. marketing communications for Anheuser-Busch, apologized profusely for the company crisis on Twitter by responding to news outlets as well as other accounts that were seeking an apology (Hall, 2018).
- April 28, 2015: Lisa Weser claimed on a Twitter post that the slogan advertised on their beer bottles was manufactured by an “external agency” and admitted that she hadn’t seen it prior to its debut online (Hall, 2018).
- April 29, 2015: Bud Light finally issued a direct apology to their Twitter followers and stated that they had ceased production of the unethical beer label (NBC Universal, 2015).

E. Bud Light’s Response

Bud Light initially responded to their beer label crisis by releasing a formal statement on their website from their vice president, Alexander Lambrecht a day after the beer label went viral online (Hall, 2018). The statement acknowledged their mistake, mentioned the commencement of an investigation, and provided some clarification on the issue. Part of the statement said, “It’s clear that this message missed the mark, and we regret it. We would never condone disrespectful or irresponsible behavior” (Hall, 2018). This same statement was posted on the official Bud Light Twitter account as well. The following day, Lisa Weser, the U.S. marketing communications director for Anheuser Busch personally apologized for the creation of the label on her own Twitter account (Hall, 2018). She directly responded to news outlets as well as other personal accounts on Twitter. For instance, Weser responded to a small account’s tweet asking for an apology by saying, “Couldn’t agree more. This one’s an undisputable facepalm,” and

linked the press release for more information on the situation (Hall, 2018). The following day, Weser tweeted off her personal account in response to Sarah Gidick’s tweet saying, “Bottle tagline was created by an external agency. I saw it for the first time today. As result, it will no longer be produced” (Hall, 2018). The next day, Bud Light officially apologized to their Twitter followers by saying, “No means no. We missed the mark and apologized. We’ve stopped producing this label” (Hall, 2018). Aside from Weser’s Twitter responses to the New York Times and The Washington Post telling them that the label was no longer in production, Bud Light never formally commented on the crisis to major news outlets. After their official apology on Twitter, Bud Light stopped addressing the issue even though some people continued to criticize the company. Therefore, Bud Light essentially let the crisis fade after apologizing and ceasing the production of the label.



F. Outcome

Although Bud Light received severe backlash across all social media platforms for their unethical beer label, the company was able to restore their credibility and reputation because Anheuser Busch has a strong, positive history of social responsibility. For instance, Bud Light has advocated for responsible drinking among adults for decades (NBC Universal). Since 1982, Bud Light has launched several campaigns that focus on responsible drinking such as their, “Know When To Say When” campaign (2020). In addition, Anheuser Busch has spent millions of dollars on advertisements to persuade adults to avoid drinking and driving (2020). Anheuser

Busch is also known for their charitable contributions. For instance, the company has donated over \$500 million dollars to a variety of organizations including the American Red Cross after the San Francisco earthquake in 1906 (2020). Therefore, the single unethical beer label did disturb the company’s reputation and credibility because it went viral on social media, but it only lasted for a short period of time. In addition, the crisis was relatively small in comparison to the two yearlong campaign and the company’s long positive history. As a result, Bud Light’s crisis temporarily affected their reputation and credibility, but didn’t last long enough to have a significant effect or detrimentally harm their sales.

Overall, Bud Light’s two yearlong “Up For Whatever,” campaign was successful in expanding their audience to include the 21–27-year-old audience. For instance, Bud Light received an enormous amount of social media interaction throughout the campaign. The social media content created by users reached to over 15 million online and resulted in 37,000 total posts (Shultz, 2013). In addition, Bud Light’s brand preference increased by approximately 30% after the campaign (Shultz, 2013). As a result, Bud Light was successful in increasing their brand awareness by associating their beer to a fun time with friends.

II. Analysis

A. Research and Analysis

Bud Light did a poor job of performing primary research when creating their new beer labels for their “Up For Whatever,” campaign. It was evident that the beer labels did not go through a strict approval process if they went through one at all. The slogan, “The perfect beer for removing ‘no’ from your vocabulary for the night,” is evidently promoting rape culture and irresponsible behavior because it is well-known that the word “no” is associated with sexual consent (Storm, 2015). In addition, Lisa Weser admitted to never seeing the label prior to its

production (Hall, 2018). As the senior director of marketing communications, it’s alarming that she wasn’t involved during the approval process of a new marketing strategy. Therefore, it’s clear that Bud Light is lacking proper communication within the company, and that they don’t have an effective method of objectively approving new materials whether it’s the lack of a diverse management team or a lack of attention to detail. In addition, their research team is not performing to the best of their ability because it’s crucial to perform adequate primary research if secondary research doesn’t provide all of the information necessary for the project at hand. Therefore, Bud Light’s team did a poor job when researching, designing, and approving their new labels.

B. PR Case Analysis

Overall, Bud Light did a good job of handling their unethical beer label crisis. For instance, they utilized vocal commiseration and rectifying behavior crisis response strategies when addressing the situation. Bud Light used the vocal commiseration crisis response strategy by providing a response of regret the day after the picture of the beer bottle with the controversial slogan went viral. The response was in the form of a press release and was also shared on their Twitter. That initial response literally said that the company regretted the production of the label that read, “The perfect beer for removing ‘no’ from your vocabulary for the night” (Guardian, 2015). However, Bud Light did not immediately apologize for the beer label which means that they were leaning toward responsibility of the crisis by demonstrating regret, but they were still slightly hesitant to take full responsibility for their actions. However, the next day Bud Light formally apologized for their actions by saying, “We missed the mark, and we apologize” (Hall, 2018). This second response is significant because it demonstrates that Bud Light apologetic for their actions and are now willingly to take full responsibility for the

production of the controversial beer label. In addition, the fact that they formally apologized illustrates their admission of fault which is significant because it makes them liable for the situation and any repercussions that may arise. For this reason, many companies avoid an official apology because they want to avoid any legal repercussions. Therefore, it’s admirable that Bud Light went the extra step and actually apologized for their actions even though the crisis didn’t outright endanger anyone.

Bud Light also utilized the rectifying behavior crisis response strategy when addressing their beer label crisis. For instance, the company mentioned in their official press release that they were going to run an investigation to determine how the production of that particular label was created and approved (NBC Universal). This is significant because every company should always run an investigation during a crisis to determine the root cause of the situation. In addition, Bud Light corrected their actions almost immediately by ceasing the production of the controversial beer labels two days after the crisis went viral online (Storm, 2013). It’s admirable that Bud Light reacted so quickly to the crisis and was able to correct their actions promptly without providing unnecessary delays. Bud Light also repented at the same time they announced that they had stopped producing the labels. The company accepted the blame for the poor choice in beer label slogans and looked to the future to improve their brand reputation by continuing with the “Up For Whatever” campaign with different marketing strategies. Therefore, Bud Light did a relatively good job at rectifying their behavior with the exception of providing compensation, but it wasn’t necessary in their situation.

Bud Light also did a decent job at implementing their crisis response strategies. For instance, they predominantly focused their communication efforts to their social media platforms which is an effective strategy in their case because their “Up For Whatever” campaign was social

media based. Therefore, their key publics were on social media and it’s likely that the majority of them were made aware of the crisis. In addition, their primary social media communication channel was Twitter which was effective because the app is known as the news platform within social media. Therefore, many people go on Twitter specifically seeking information and news. As a result, their tactical implementation of their crisis response strategies was effective for their specific case.

C. Other Cases

Bud Light’s “Up For Whatever” case study is similar to is the Domino’s Pizza case study because they both predominantly used social media channels to implement their crisis response strategies. For instance, Bud Light primarily used Twitter to update their key publics about the crisis because that is where their target audience was. Similarly, Domino’s pizza also focused their crisis response strategies on social media. However, Domino’s used YouTube as their primary communication channel because that is where their crisis occurred and went viral. In addition, in both cases the companies restricted their communication channels (Domino’s initially) to confine the crisis. However, neither company was able to stop their crisis from going viral on social media. Even so, Domino’s Pizza did a much better job at expanding their communication channels after they realized that their crisis was viral than Bud Light did. Domino’s expanded their communication channels to traditional media like major newspapers and had an executive make appearances on popular television shows to apologize for the incident. In contrast, Bud Light didn’t expand their communication channels at all after the crisis went viral and simply let the situation subside after their formal apology.

Bud Light’s “Up For Whatever” case study is also similar to Starbuck’s “Two Men Arrested for Doing ...Not much” case study because they both effectively utilized the rectifying

behavior crisis response strategy. For instance, Bud Light ran an investigation, formally apologized on Twitter, corrected their actions by ceasing the production of the label, and took full responsibility for the poor choice of slogan on their beer bottles. Similarly, Starbucks announced that they were going to run an investigation and outlined how they were going to undergo the investigation which Bud Light lacked. Starbucks was also quick to correct their actions and implemented racial-bias training throughout all of their U.S. locations. In addition, Starbucks also took full responsibility for the crisis and established permanent changes by implementing a new policy where everyone is welcome in the stores regardless of whether they are customers. Bud Light lacked this transparency in making lasting changes within the company to ensure a similar issue doesn't arise again. However, both Bud Light and Starbucks effectively used the rectifying behavior crisis response strategies in their situations.

Lastly, Bud Light's “Up For Whatever” case study is similar to SeaWorld's Blackfish case study because both companies faced ethical dilemmas. For instance, Bud Light's new beer labels are unethical because they promoted rape culture and irresponsible behavior while intoxicated. This is significant because the promotion of these labels raises the question of whether society truly values sexual consent since they were somehow approved for production. Similarly, SeaWorld's case study consists of an unethical dilemma because the company is attempting to defend themselves from a documentary that illustrates various sea animals being confined in small places, overworked, and ultimately abused for people's entertainment. This is significant because SeaWorld's unethical practices pose the question of whether society truly values and cares about animals because the company has been around for years and once again someone approved the concept. As a result, both Bud Light and SeaWorld face internal, ethical situations that could have been prevented with proper research and attention.

D. My Opinions: Recommendations and Critiques

Overall, I think Bud Light handled their controversial beer slogan crisis really well. They responded promptly to the crisis with a formal press release and officially apologized the next day. In addition, they rectified their behavior by ceasing the production of the beer labels and fully accepting the blame for their actions. Bud Light didn't practice the strategic inaction or defensive crisis communication strategies which I think is admirable because they definitely could have done that. Therefore, their crisis management was generally well executed.

However, I do think Bud Light should have expanded their communicative channels during the crisis. For instance, they predominantly restricted their communication to social media because that is where their target audience was which makes sense. However, I think it would have been beneficial for Bud Light to provide major news outlets with official comments from a company executive. Bud Light completely disregarded the major newspapers like The Washington Post by simply not providing a comment and only addressing the crisis on their owned media. While beneficial because they have complete control over the narrative, I think they should have used traditional media to ensure that all of their target publics were made aware of the situation and how they are fixing it.

In addition, I think Bud Light should have provided more information and updates as to how the company is being reformed to ensure a crisis like this never happens again. After they formally apologized on Twitter, the company essentially let the crisis die down on its own even though people were still criticizing their slogan. Although this strategy may be effective because it draws less attention to the situation, I think it could have been beneficial to consumers and shareholders to know the company's future corrective plans. Instead, Bud Light simply

continued with their “Up For Whatever” campaign and changed their marketing strategies to steer away from the crisis. This was an effective method because the campaign was a success, but I think it would have been helpful if they provided a statement about how they are going to reform the personnel or their management style to ensure proper communication within the company.

Lastly and most importantly, I think Bud Light should have conducted proper primary research prior to releasing their beer labels because it ultimately could’ve prevented the entire crisis. I would recommend the company to conduct surveys and focus groups with representative samples of their target audience to determine how people interpret the various slogans on the beer labels. Bud Light should have also had a more extensive approval process with the company for any slogans they plan on producing. For instance, Lisa Weser, the U.S. marketing communications director claimed to be unaware of the slogan because it was created by a third-party agency. Therefore, the slogans did not undergo proper scrutiny within Bud Light before being mass produced which is evidently a huge internal error.

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