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Mitigating the Risk of Cancel Culture

The digital world in which we live has given rise to 'cancel culture'. Holding brands/companies accountable for their words or actions is nothing new but doing so has never been easier than it is today, making the risks greater and the recovery – which is not always possible – more challenging.

By Anne-Marie Hardie

Social media has become an essential marketing tool to attract new consumers and foster relationships with existing ones. However, there is a dark side to social media: the 'cancel culture'. Cancel culture or call-out culture is a contemporary phrase used to refer to a form of ostracism in which a person, brand/company, or organisation, is thrust out of social or professional circles – whether it be online, on social media, or in person. Those subject to this ostracism are said to have been 'cancelled'. The concept of holding companies accountable for their actions is not a new thing, but the internet has provided anonymity, increasing the risk of smear campaigns that target both the company and the personal lives of the founders.

On 15 December 2020, coffee brand Ristretto Roasters, based in Portland, Oregon, ceased all operations reeling from the backlash of cancel culture. The company had gained attention when journalist Nancy Rommelmann, the spouse of

Ristretto owner, Din Johnson, began a YouTube series called #MeNeither. Ristretto Roasters was initially called out in January 2019, when thirty current and former employees issued a letter condemning the views expressed by Johnson's wife. The backlash escalated, resulting in the loss of several wholesale accounts, customer boycotts, and eventually forcing the brand to close the doors of its four cafés and roasting operation.

Social media, both in its anonymity and speed of transmission, has accelerated the impact of 'calls to action', placing pressure on individuals and businesses, to either respond to their demand or risk being cancelled themselves. "Cancel culture is consequence culture, so basically, if you don't like who I am, there could be consequences," said Eric Yaverbaum, CEO, Ericho Communications, New York.

Although every company is at risk of being cancelled, some hot buttons increase a brand's vulnerability, including Covid-19, race, sexual orientation, and privilege. "What we're seeing right now is that a group of consumers, which tend to be younger, demand organisations and their leaders to take a stand on certain topics," said Sara Christensen, a cancel culture consultant. "The challenge is if they do not take a stand, they can risk getting attacked, and if they take a stand that the consumer group doesn't agree with, they are also at risk."

Christensen works with businesses to identify what she calls "the intersectionality trip wires"



to help determine whether it makes sense for a company to take a stand on a particular topic; this includes reviewing the benefits and potential downfalls of taking a stand. "It's very important to go into these situations with your eyes wide open, including having a clear communication strategy."

As a cancel culture consultant, Christensen helps organisations identify their vulnerabilities, including reviewing the business assets, banking, websites, and social media accounts, to ensure that they are secure. "The other thing they can do to protect themselves is to really look at the vulnerability of their personal information," she said. "I always recommend that people go online, figure out what type of personal information about them is out there, including addresses, vehicle information, bank accounts, cell phone accounts, and identifying details about their family, and then invest the time to remove that data." These proactive actions can help reduce the risk of cancel culture entering a brand owner's private space.

Focusing on Core Values

Recovery from cancel culture, although challenging, is possible. However, brands need to be able to flip the script with a clearly defined long-term strategy, in order for them to come back stronger than they were before.

On 29 May 2018, Starbucks Coffee made headlines when it closed more than 8,000 of its stores for racial bias training. The training was prompted by an incident in a Philadelphia,

Pennsylvania store, where two African American men were refused access to a bathroom, resulting in the police being called to the café to remove the individuals. The company, which prides itself in being the third place for people, adopted a new restroom policy that allowed access without a purchase. Since 2018, the company has adopted several initiatives to address bias, inclusion and equity, including hiring commitments, a new leadership accelerator program for BIPOC (Black, indigenous, and people of colour) partners, and a commitment to increase Starbucks' business with diverse suppliers to 1.5 billion by 2030.

"If you've made a mistake, an apology is warranted, but don't just say I'm sorry, layout exactly how you're going to address the shortcomings," said Yaverbaum. "We all make mistakes, it's called being human, but it's when we refuse to do better that it's the most damaging."

Black Rifle Coffee, based in Salt Lake City, Utah, is a veteran-owned company known for its love of coffee and guns. Last July, the company risked being cancelled by its customer base after being interviewed by *The New York Times*. The resulting article included controversial statements against bigotry, including calling out extremists, which some of the company's followers interpreted as going against their brand's culture, resulting in a social media frenzy, boycotts and hate mail from their customer base.

Shortly thereafter, founder and CEO of Black Rifle Coffee, Evan Hafer, took to social media to clarify several aspects of the article, including that he was a proud conservative, whose statements were against anti-Semitism and racism, not conservatives. In November 2021, the company signed a deal with SilverBox Engaged Merger Corp becoming a publicly-owned company. The merger will allow the brand to obtain its growth objective, including bringing it closer to its goal of hiring 10,000 veterans.

Protecting Your Brand

Although it is impossible to become immune to cancel culture, there are a few strategies that companies can do to provide an additional layer of insulation. "If you want to build an authentic cancel proof company, the brand requires some soul searching on what its core values are," said Yaverbaum. "It's about considering what you believe in and what you want to champion."

Batch Coffee is a UK-based subscription company that is committed to maintaining strong lines of communication and in turn, transparency with their customers. This includes sending out a 'thank you video' file when customers >



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Batch Coffee actively engages with its consumers, even sending a 'thank you video' file when they make a purchase.

Image courtesy of Batch Coffee

make a purchase. By fostering this relationship early, co-founder Tom Saxon, hopes that if an issue does arise, the consumer would be more likely to approach the company directly instead of heading online with the complaint.

“Because we started small, we were able to develop almost a personal relationship with a lot of our customers, and we’ve kept that going as we continued to grow,” said Saxon. “The best way for companies to build and maintain those consumer connections, is to personally reach out to customers to check in with them, it’s about showing up to the conversation and asking for their honest opinions.” Batch Coffee is also proactive about its business, including maintaining close contact with its entire supply chain so that it can respond to any potential challenge, with minimal (if any) disruption to the end customer.

Once those values are identified, the brand/company needs to ensure that all decisions and actions are aligned with those beliefs. Failing to do so could potentially put the brand/company at risk of being cancelled. Yaverbaum explained that if a company’s values are centred around environmental sustainability, then it cannot partner with a supplier that supports fossil fuels.

Avoid the Hashtag Band Wagon

Participating in social movements should not be automatic, as this approach could become

misinterpreted as tokenism. “It can’t be about following the latest trend, movement or hashtag,” said Yaverbaum. “Instead, it should be about identifying the culture that you want to have and being authentic about it.” This includes investing the time to listen and understand the conversations that surround you, so that you can determine if they are the ones that you want to participate in. “Being called out sometimes isn’t bad; brands are learning from their actions and the importance of aligning their words and actions with their values and culture, instead of tokenising.”

Although, cancel culture is no longer obtaining as many headlines as in the past, it does not mean that it has faded. Christensen shared that she is continually made aware of companies that have been impacted by cancel culture, from either their customer base, current or past employees, or even competitors. “You need to go into situations with your eyes wide open, thinking if I’m going to share this information with my employees or on my social media feed, would I also be okay if it was shared on the front page of *The New York Times*,” she said. “It’s about being aware of the potential threat and having a plan for it.” 📌

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Nearly 85 percent of past-day coffee drinkers have coffee with breakfast, and about the same number have coffee at home. Those morning coffee drinkers know exactly how that first cup of coffee helps them get moving, and NCA wants to make sure they know the benefits are much greater than just the warm fuzzy feeling from waking up to the aroma and flavour of a fresh brew.

In fact, decades of independent scientific evidence show that drinking coffee (both caffeinated and decaffeinated) is associated with longer, healthier, happier lives. Studies show that coffee improves cognitive function and mental health and reduces risk of stroke and multiple cancers, just to name a few of its many benefits.

Covid's Effect on Consumer Behaviour

As Covid-19 turned kitchens into conference rooms and living rooms into classrooms, it is no surprise that Americans drank more coffee at home than ever. NCDT polling conducted at key points during the pandemic found elevated at-home coffee consumption, and that effect clearly has staying power.

Perhaps because they missed running out to their favourite coffee shops, coffee drinkers explored new types of coffee and even experimented with recreating coffee shop specials at home. In our special report on Covid-19 coffee habits released in April 2021 (*Coffee, Consumers, & COVID-19: Road Map to Recovery*), the NCA found that more than 40 percent of Americans had experimented with a new type of coffee. Nearly one-quarter bought a new coffee machine for home, and slightly more than one-quarter had tried to recreate café favourites at home.

At home or on-the-go, coffee drinkers also turned to innovative and tech-based options during the pandemic. App-based ordering and drive-thrus skyrocketed 30 percent between January 2020 and January 2021 and remain well above pre-pandemic levels. Online shopping also percolated up the ranks, jumping up 60 percent between January and September 2020.

Nothing can take the place of beloved coffee businesses and beverages, though. The NCA's polling throughout the pandemic has shown consistent yearning for pre-pandemic routines. While many Americans enjoy their home coffee routines, 35 percent missed their favourite coffee businesses.

Looking ahead, we expect to see further shifts as Americans adapt new work schedules – whether in offices, hybrid models, or permanently working from home. Signals are already showing that coffee drinkers are venturing away from home.



Image courtesy of Finlay's

Espresso-based beverage consumption dropped between January and September 2021 but has since rebounded.

Consumption after breakfast is up 15 percent since July, indicating that Americans might be taking their coffee with them during commutes or returning to mid-morning office coffee breaks.

Consumption of espresso-based beverages is also a good indicator, as these beverages are typically prepared away from home. Consumption of espresso-based beverages dropped by 16 percent between January and September 2021 but rebounded in our latest round of polling to the highest level in NCDT history. The latest data show that 26 percent of past-day coffee drinkers had an espresso-based beverage.

Specialty coffee is also one to watch – 43 percent of past-day coffee drinkers had specialty coffee, another NCDT record and up by 20 percent since January 2021.

Coffee has an incredible ability to span from a reliable old favourite to an exciting new experience, and everything in between. NCA's consumer polling and research are unmatched in their ability to help everyone in the coffee community measure and track coffee's popularity today and our pathways for tomorrow.

When it comes to your coffee business staying on top of these trends, NCA is here to help. Now released twice yearly, the National Coffee Data Trends report is the flagship product in our NCDT Market Research Series.

To learn more about the NCDT Market Research Series, visit ncausa.org.

William 'Bill' Murray became president and CEO of the National Coffee Association (NCA) in June 2014, after holding leadership positions at the Public Relations Society of America and the Motion Picture Association. He is not the star of *Caddyshack*.