

Leeds University Business School – Research and Innovation Podcast

Episode 25: Freedom within a framework

Speakers: Sourindra Banerjee and Gareth Turner

Sourindra: Hello. You are listening to the Research and Innovation Podcast. I am Dr Sourindra Banerjee, Associate Professor of Marketing at Leeds University Business School, and today I'm joined by Gareth Turner, head of brand at Weetabix. Thanks for joining us, Gareth.

Gareth: No problem. Great to be here.

Sourindra: In today's show, we are going to be talking about how consumers engage with brands on social media. Weetabix recently had a lot of success with their tweet, "Why should bread have all the fun when there's Weetabix? Serving up Heinz UK beans on bix for breakfast with a twist." And both brands' slogans, "It has to be Heinz," and, "Have you had your Weetabix?" The photo showed a plate with two Weetabix on, covered in Heinz baked beans. So, this particular tweet garnered 106.6k retweets, 134.2k likes and 22.1k replies. So, let's hear from Gareth what he has to say about this viral tweet.

Gareth: Thanks. To give you some more numbers, we had... that tweet alone on the 9th of February had 1.25 billion impressions, 309 million reach, six million engagements with over 600 other brands, and over 1200 media mentions. The media value of that tweet and everything, the PR we gained in that, was well over two million pounds. So, you could say it was a fairly successful day at the office for us. But it was a long time... it's just one part of what we do. It's just one execution in a longstanding strategy and activation plan. So, really it was just one part of a well-established strategy. We often get... we get asked, I think there are three questions we get asked about that tweet - without putting words in your mouth - but the three questions we get are: who had that idea? Were you scared? And how did it happen? People want to know the background to it. So, as I say, who had the idea was part of a long, established strategy. And the brand is part of British culture, it's incredibly well recognised, we've got 96% prompted awareness, but it's not necessarily top of mind for people or salient enough for people when they are going into stores. So, we have to improve, we had to improve our mental availability. So, we changed, back in the summer of 2020, changed our media planning a little bit, and not only did we get

on traditional media with more weeks on air etcetera, but we super-charged our social media to be a more targeted, a bit more relevant, to get a bit cut through. And so, you combine that with the rest of the inspiration work we've done for some time now, so we have a thing called "any which way-abix", any which way-abix, which is a TV strand we did with recipe book activation. We talked once about a breaded chicken recipe, which seemed to get a lot of traction in the national press, we put all that together, we thought, hang on, there's something worth exploring here. So, we developed a few of these, we had Marmite, we had Innocent, we had Cathedral City cheese, and we had Heinz beans. And we engaged with these guys, we spoke to them, and made it happen. So, yes, that's, in a nutshell, kind of, how this thing that is just one moment in a campaign strand of our communication that has been going on since... well, been going on for a few years now, but we rebooted it in summer 2020, and we've had some... that was an amazing result. We've had some incredible results more widely than just a very famous, or infamous, tweet.

Sourindra: So, you said three questions. So, first is: who came up with it? So, I got that. And...

Gareth: So, the other two questions were: were you scared? And how did it happen? So, were we scared? The truth is not really. The truth is that we've been working to create a culture at Weetabix, in the Weetabix marketing team which promotes bravery, which allows people to be autonomous, which allows people to be entrepreneurial and to create some freedom to try some stuff, to test and learn. And because... I mean this was a little bit out there, let's be honest about that, but it was pushing the boundaries of a strategy that exists already. So, we would talk about recipes a lot. We found that some slightly more provocative recipes seemed to get a lot more traction, and we've done them before, so it wasn't the first time... the beans one wasn't the first one we've done. It seemed to have got the most interest. So, the reality is, it felt relatively safe. I think there is something interesting about encouraging brave work in your team by making the brave work feel less brave, and making it feel just normal. So, yes, that's the bravery. How do you make it happen? You prep as part of the strategy, you engage with the other brands, so Heinz in this example. We had spoken to Heinz, is it okay to work with you on this? To tweet with you? Will you get involved? Yes, we will. And we'd spoken to other brands as well, we had prepared our responses, we had prepared our...

the framework, the boundaries for some slightly more agile responses as well. And we empowered the team to go and deploy it. So, it's as simple and as boring as that in the background.

Sourindra: So, you have a really empowered marketing team where a lot of the power has been relinquished to these people who, kind of, make these tweets?

Gareth: Yes, I think we...

Sourindra: Is that a fair summary?

Gareth: Yes, I have my marketing team around me, I have my brand team, and we have an agency roster who help us there. So, we've got a brave culture, we've got this freedom within a framework. We've got great brand understanding from my team and our external agencies. And we know the things we need to do to bring people into the brand. So, we know the sort of things we want to talk about, the sort of messaging we want to put out there to try to grow our relevance. We have strong engagement plan with key stakeholders, so I think you have to... whether that's Heinz, or whether that's our legal team, whether that's me, or agencies, you have to engage prior to the... engage with them. And I think you have to assume good intent, you have to... no one is coming to work deliberately to mess things up or to do things wrong, people are coming in because they want to do great work, they want great stuff on their CV, they want stuff to be proud of. And you do that by creating the environment around that and encouraging that. I think that's what we do pretty well at Weetabix.

Sourindra: Yes, great. So, one more thing, it seems wit plays a great role in your messaging, you know? You have a series of, you know, quite a few of your tweets are very witty. Is that accurate?

Gareth: Yes. It's kind of you to say. I think that's what we set out to try and achieve. I have a bit of a thing where I think that social media is just, or digital, is just another channel. It's not a strategy in itself, it's a tactic. It's a channel to deliver a strategy. So, our strategy is that we want to deliver consistent on-brand posts or TV ads or packaging or in-store media or yadda yadda yadda, whatever it is. So, social media, I think we have to view as just another media channel. My job and the brand's job is to make sure that we're being ruthlessly consistent, whether we're on social media or our packaging. And the Weetabix tone of voice is a tone of voice that has a gentle, wry, British humour to it. So,

yes, it absolutely was deliberate that it's in our social media posts, but it's also deliberate in our TV ads and everywhere else. It's really important to be consistent, as I say, across all the channels so that it helps to build that mental availability when people recognise a tone of voice, or they recognise a colourway, or they recognise music or a jingle or a logo or whatever it might be.

Sourindra: Yes. So, does your marketing team come up, have a strategy to come up with well-timed posts?

Gareth: Yes. So, we do plan our content calendars out as much as possible. We engage with people like Marcus Rashford or Heinz to understand what they are planning, understand their thinking, to share our plans. And we work with them to look for news events, we plan it out where we might be able to do something interesting. That Heinz tweet, for example, was just something we wanted to do, and so we approached them, and we did it. Now, we were able to plan that, we were able to plan our responses, we were able to engage with other brands to make sure that we appeared to be super agile. But I think the joy of that moment on the 9th of February was the other brands responses, the pile on that they had at that moment. That's what made it go viral, and you have to admire retailers like Aldi and Sainsbury's especially who were super quick to make that... their comment relevant, funny, they didn't have to go through hoops of approval, I'm sure, and one has to feel sorry for the brand managers who are sitting there a week later still waiting for approval from their regulatory teams. The moment had gone, and they weren't able to pile on in the way that the more agile and, perhaps, slightly more social media savvy brands have been able to do.

Sourindra: Yes. So, one more point regarding this impact that you had. So, apart from the impressions and the other media impact, was there an impact on sales? Did it actually improve sales?

Gareth: I think difficult to say. Sainsbury's definitely reported some immediate uplift, I saw that in the trade press. But the reality is, I don't think you expect to see immediate uplifts. We wouldn't expect to see immediate uplifts with a TV ad, for example, we have a longer term approach to return on investment. So, we measure the effectiveness of our media strategy in months and years, rather than days and weeks. And, as I said, this tweet was only a part of the wider plan. So, it's tough to attribute anything directly to this one element of that broader plan, but to give you

some numbers, since we rebooted our strategy in the summer of 2020, our sales value has grown by 9%, our penetration has grown by 2%, our spontaneous awareness has grown by 15%, our likelihood to purchase intent has grown by a quarter, by 24%. So, our lead measures are very strong right now. In the fullness of time, we'll see whether that converts into more sales. But I'd say the early signs are pretty positive right now.

Sourindra: Excellent, excellent. Those numbers are very good. So, thanks Gareth for sharing your views on this viral tweet.

Gareth: No problem, it's been great to be here. Thanks for inviting me, it's always nice for a marketer to be invited to talk about their work. So, thank you. Thank you for that. And it's great, I've presented at your place, the Business School a few times in the past, and I'm keen to hear more from students there. So, students can get hold of me, or anyone can get hold of me if they want to find out more about what we do. You just have to search for me on LinkedIn, Gareth Turner and Weetabix and you'll find me somehow.

Sourindra: Thanks. We hope our listeners enjoyed the show. If you are interested in finding out more about Leeds University Business School research on this topic of social media engagement, our contact details are in the show notes below.