

MARKETING

## Rolex, Lexus hit with controversy from USGA sponsorship

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*Trump National Golf Club*

By BRIELLE JAEKEL

Swiss watchmaker Rolex and luxury automaker Lexus are navigating rough waters since their sponsorship of the United States Women's Open is receiving backlash for being held at a Trump-owned golf course.

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Lexus is attempting to gracefully manage the scandal by releasing a statement online and shared on its social media feeds, claiming continued support for the USGA but understanding why there is concern. The incident is one of many that marketers have experienced in aligning their brand with President Trump's administration, accidental and not.

"It is getting difficult for many brands to separate themselves politically," said Carrie McIlveen, director of marketing at **Metia**. "They are at risk of alienating current and potential customers if they do not consider the politically conscious consumers.

"Emotions greatly influence buying decisions and politics can arouse passionate reactions; both positively or in the USGA Women's Open, quite negatively," she said. "In today's landscape, customers want to know what brands believe in and where their values are rooted."

Ms. McIlveen is not affiliated with USGA, Lexus or Rolex but agreed to comment as an industry expert.

### Backlash and reactions

The USGA Women's Open has made a deal to be held at a Trump brand golf course in New Jersey. However, many organizations and consumers opposed to the Trump administration are reaching out to brands sponsoring the event on social media and other outlets.



*USGA tweets photo of Eun Jeong Seong*

Those opposing the event being held at the golf course are hoping to urge brands to pull their sponsorship to coerce the event to be held elsewhere. Protestors believe the marketers are aligning their brands with misogyny and corruption.

Many believe that the sporting event's location poses a conflict of interest since the President of the United States owns the course.

Multiple organizations have stepped forward with digital hubs and content to help consumers voice their concerns to the sponsors. An alternate Twitter account has been made for the USGA to continue urging social media users to join the protest.

Lexus, hoping to smooth over the controversy, sent out a release explaining that the brand has been a proud sponsor of the USGA for more than 11 years. The automaker went on to detail how it is proud to support women and their passion for golf and that it understands why there is concern but that it has no say in the location of the tournaments.

We have been a sponsor of [@USGA](#) for 11 years & we're proud to support women and their passion for the game of [#golf](#). <https://t.co/ZqVc9ispB0> [pic.twitter.com/NtMWDIJJaYq](https://pic.twitter.com/NtMWDIJJaYq)

Lexus (@Lexus) [March 14, 2017](#)

The USGA released a statement saying, "During his presidential campaign, Mr. Trump has made some remarks that are at odds with our belief that golf should be welcoming and inclusive for all. We have reiterated for more than a year that we do not share his views, and that is still true.

"With the 2017 U.S. Women's Open a few months away, our focus is on conducting an excellent championship for the players, the spectators, the fans and the volunteers."

Rolex has not commented on the issue.

#### Brands and controversy

The incident brings up an issue for brands, which has become much more of an issue as politics become increasingly volatile and social media can expedite these problems. Brands need to think carefully about how their actions can be taken and whether or not they have a place to jump in on an issue.

The current administration has caused quite a bit of upheaval and controversy for brands.

For instance, the extra security measures put in place around Trump Tower on New York's Fifth Avenue have been hurting business for its neighboring retailers.

Storefronts in close proximity to President-elect Donald Trump's home, including Tiffany & Co. and Gucci, have seen decreased foot traffic as barricades deter shoppers and worsen congestion on the already busy thoroughfare in Midtown Manhattan. Prior to going into the holiday season, as the heightened security continued, it was borderline detrimental to businesses' bottom lines ([see more](#)).

Now that President Trump has officially begun his term, his eponymous hotel group has found itself on the receiving end of partisan dissent.

The social media accounts for the Trump Hotel Collection were being used as a platform for those who disagree with Mr. Trump's policies to publicly air their opinions, turning the marketing channels into a place of political debate. Now that the reactions to its namesake founder's actions in office are extending to Trump Hotels, how should the hotelier react ([see more](#))?

"The new marketing reality is that cultural values should be considered during the planning of any events and/or campaigns," Ms. McIlveen said. "Brands need to understand who their audiences are, the story being told, and how it may resonate through the message delivered."

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