

MARKETING

2019's biggest PR blunders: Have luxury brands learned their lessons?

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Burberry's sweatshirt under fire. Image credit: Burberry

By [Megan Doyle](#)

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What a year it has been for luxury brands and their ill-conceived, offensive ideas that resulted in public backlash, apologies and bridge building of unprecedented levels.

This year saw Gucci sell a jumper depicting blackface, Burberry send a hoodie with a noose around the neck down the runway and Dior appropriate Native American culture in the Johnny Depp-fronted Sauvage campaign, to name just a few incidents that riled up the Internet.

If anything, these incidents prove that few major luxury brands had learned from the biggest PR crisis of the previous year Dolce & Gabbana's Chinese campaign, followed by Stephano Gabbana's racist Instagram rants that alienated and enraged mainland Chinese consumers.

Dolce & Gabbana was forced to cancel its Shanghai show at the last minute and is said to be still feeling the impact of being shunned by the world's biggest luxury market.

Having lost their major Chinese stockists, in July this year, L2 reported that social media engagement around Dolce & Gabbana was down 98 percent in China.

It is not just reputation or cultural credibility on the line. Brands stand to lose millions in potential profit by failing to do their due diligence as increasingly unforgiving customers vote with their wallets.

"Nowadays, you can't control fully your message as luxury is an ecosystem in which the consumer has a say," said Mario Ortelli, managing partner of Ortelli&Co.

"Today's luxury consumer is more sensitive about culture, society and the environment than ever before, and thanks to digital, its *[sic]* ability to access information has also increased," she said.

Social media has played a key role in the prevalence of such incidents, explains Jonathan Hemus, founder and managing director of crisis management firm Insignia Communications.

"What social media does is it makes both the likelihood and the impact higher," Mr. Hemus said.

"Social media creates far greater transparency and provides the opportunity for everybody to express a view, and social media can take a negative story global within minutes," he said.



Actor Johnny Depp appeared in the Dior Parfums Sauvage campaign. Image credit: Dior

Considering the PR blunders made this year, how have luxury's biggest brands learnt from their mistakes and implemented meaningful structural changes within their businesses?

Burberry's blunder

It was a camel hoodie with a drawstring fashioned into a noose that caught the public's attention at British heritage label Burberry's AW19 show in February this year.

Model Liz Kennedy, who walked in the show, called out the offending garment on social media stating simply: "Suicide is not fashion" and detailing how she had attempted to raise her concerns before the show, only to be dismissed ([see story](#)).

A week later, Burberry chief executive Marco Gobbetti publicly apologized for the hoodie with a heartfelt statement on social media.

"We are determined to learn from this and having spoken with our employees, experts and communities we impacted," Mr. Gobbetti said at the time.

Mr. Gobbetti also introduced a diversity and inclusion initiative that would seek to increase cultural understanding and diversify talent within the company.

Launching meaningful initiatives to prevent future blunders certainly demonstrates a concerted effort to rectify mistakes, which is crucial for any company in this situation, Mr. Hemus said.

"Brands are usually forgiven for a single mistake, but organizations that have multiple mistakes are less likely to be forgiven," Mr. Hemus said.

"You can't keep apologizing, you have to apologize and then make sure it doesn't happen again," he said.

Since February, Burberry has partnered with Samaritans UK, The Prince's Trust and Year Up to support disadvantaged and vulnerable young people, as well as expanding their creative arts scholarship internationally and rolling out mandatory unconscious bias training for all employees globally.

Gucci's gaffe

Around the same time as Burberry's hoodie ignited the internet, Gucci found itself in hot water over a black knitted balaclava jumper, facing accusations that it resembled blackface.

The sweater was pulled from stores, but the damage had been done ([see story](#)).



Gucci's sweater before it was pulled. Image credit: Gucci

Similarly to Burberry, Gucci apologized and made a promise to improve shortfalls within its organization, announcing the launch of four initiatives as part of "a long-term plan of actions designed to further embed cultural diversity and awareness in the company," it said in a statement.

What resulted was the Gucci Changemakers program, a volunteering scheme, impact fund and scholarship initiative led by Rene Tirado, global head of diversity, equity and inclusion at Gucci.

"With the scholarship program, we aim to create opportunities and visibility for traditionally under-represented creatives," said lawyer and writer Yaseen Eldik, who is the Gucci Changemakers Council co-chair, in a statement.

"Our goal is to break down barriers, particularly financial, and make fashion more diverse and inclusive," he said.

The Changemakers' advisory council includes activists, educators and philanthropists including Naomi Campbell, Will.i.am, Cleo Wade and Harlem couturier Dapper Dan.

Having collaborated with Gucci since 2017, Dapper Dan shared a statement on Instagram explaining his involvement in the Changemakers project.

"We've helped Gucci come up with programs that will positively impact the black community and fashion, as a whole," he said. "It's imperative that we have opportunities to learn of a world-class level, and also have a seat at the table to say how we should be represented."

While it is clear that a lack of diversity is the common thread between these incidents, what exactly does diversity mean when it comes to recruitment of talent?

"Diversity in the conventional sense ethnicity, sexuality, gender is clearly important," Mr. Hemus said. "But just as important is diversity of thinking.

"You want to actively encourage input from people who bring a different perspective and point of view," he said.

"You want to be challenged in a constructive way before you've gone ahead with your plan, not afterwards when it's in the public domain."

Dior's debacle

But what about when a brand believes it has done its due diligence before releasing a problematic piece of work?

In August, Dior unveiled a short teaser clip for its Savage campaign, called "We are the Land," starring actor Johnny Depp and Canku One Star of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe.



Dior's latest Sauvage campaign was a collaboration with Native American consultants. Image courtesy of Dior Parfums

The French house had been advised by the indigenous advocacy organization, Americans for Indian Opportunity (AIO) throughout the creation of the campaign, although this was not obvious upon viewing.

The teaser was immediately slammed as racist, with viewers unhappy that Dior had appeared to appropriate Native American culture to sell perfume, especially considering the colonialist connotations of the word "sauvage" meaning "wild" in French.

The AIO initially defended their involvement but later apologized on social media ([see story](#)).

"We believed that we had an opportunity to reshape longstanding and damaging representations of Native peoples on an international scale," the AIO's board of directors wrote in a statement. "That did not bear out as we had hoped and intended, especially in Dior's media and public relations campaign, in which we did not consult or have prior knowledge."

Following the backlash, Dior's full Sauvage campaign film was never released.

Vanessa Friedman, The New York Times fashion director and chief fashion critic, reflected on the ramifications of the incident in September, saying: "A full retreat may make for a safe campaign. But it doesn't make for deeper understanding on anyone's part, and it doesn't encourage any kind of cross-cultural fertilization or civil debate. When you get mocked for claiming you tried, why try at all?"

Mr. Hemus believes that more thorough risk assessments would lead to fewer PR mistakes like that of Dior's Sauvage.

"It's very easy to get carried away with the upsides of a campaign, but you do also need to actively plan for the downsides," Mr. Hemus said.

"Have someone to play the role of devil's advocate, people within your brand who can be creative pessimists to say: On the face of it, this looks like a wonderful initiative or opportunity for the brand, but let's take some time to think about how that could go wrong. What are the downsides? What are the risks?"

Looking back on the year in which luxury brands offended and shocked the world through thoughtlessly problematic products and campaigns, is there hope yet that brands will do better in 2020?

It is certainly a promising sign when companies such as Chanel act proactively, rather than in response to a mistake, to improve their diversity and inclusion policies.

In July, the French house recruited its first head of diversity and inclusion, Fiona Pargeter.

"There certainly is a greater recognition among many organizations that the best form of crisis management is preventing it in the first place," Mr. Hemus.

However, he warns there is still a long way to go.

"I don't see an end to issues of this kind," Mr. Hemus said. "One would hope there won't be quite as many next year, but I don't see us being out of business due to a lack of crises."



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