

Sweet Jesus Crisis Communication Response Plan

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Background

Sweet Jesus is a chain of gourmet ice cream shops in Canada. The company is also expanding into the United States, with a new store located in Baltimore, Maryland. At the end of March 2018, the growing company encountered a crisis when its marketing faced backlash from many Christians. From the somewhat demonic depiction of children, to the name “Sweet Jesus” itself, people found the branding to be offensive and disrespectful to their religion. Some called for a boycott of Sweet Jesus, although the company claimed that its intent was not to offend anyone. The name is taken from the common exclamation “Sweet Jesus,” but the good intentions may be questioned when the rest of the advertising is considered. Many took issue with the upside down cross and lightning bolt on the label, but the company refused to change its branding, packaging or advertising.¹

¹ Byrne, J.A. (2018, March 31). Christians wage war against Sweet Jesus. *New York Post*.

Retrieved from <https://nypost.com/2018/03/31/christians-wage-war-against-sweet-jesus/>

Strategies

- Show the diversity of religious backgrounds in the company & how the company respects that
- Keep and justify the current branding in a respectful, yet unapologetic way
- Maintain and embrace the provocative brand image
- Use the publicity from the boycott/backlash to gain business

Tactics

- Create social media posts from employees & fans of Sweet Jesus from different religious backgrounds & specifically some Christians, showing that they like the brand and it should be taken lightly.
- Post a lighthearted video on the company website and social media (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) that shows people using the phrase “Sweet Jesus” in typical situations, as well as in reference to the ice cream.
- Create social media posts, banner ads and billboards that challenge customers to try Sweet Jesus ice cream and see for themselves if it’s worthy of the phrase.
- Have a food blogger or a food content creator like Food Insider come to a store to do a behind-the-scenes feature about how the ice cream is made and how they came up with the branding. This feeds on the publicity created by the backlash to encourage new customers to try Sweet Jesus. This could also humanize the company and show opponents that the branding is lighthearted.

Key Messages

- Some of our advertising is intended to be provocative, but in no way is it reflective of negative attitudes toward any religious group.
 - The phrase “Sweet Jesus” is a common phrase that expresses joy, and we feel that it is fitting and appropriate advertising for the ice cream we sell.
 - We chose our branding because it’s a taboo for most people in our society, not just a certain group. Our goal was not to make any kind of larger statement on religion. Our goal is to create bold branding that sells ice cream, with the overall purpose of bringing people together.
- As a company that is centered in Toronto and expanding into the United States, we acknowledge and appreciate the diversity of the communities we do business in.
 - We strive to be respected, contributing members of the communities we serve and we know that comes from respecting our customers of all religious backgrounds.
 - Our employees come from various religious backgrounds. Our policies and company culture ensure a workplace environment that is accepting of the differences that make us all special.
- Our main goal is to bring positivity to people of all cultures, religions, backgrounds and identities through our products, customer service and branding.
 - Amidst the division many people may feel in society, ice cream and a fun atmosphere are things that can bring us together, or at least make the world a bit brighter.
 - Our policies and employee training stress the importance of diversity and acceptance.

Q & A

Q: If this were any other religion, it would be inappropriate. Why is it ok to mock Christianity?

A: Our intent has never been and never will be to mock or invalidate anyone's religious beliefs. Our branding stems from the saying "Sweet Jesus," which is a common phrase that usually has little religious intent. Our marketing should not be taken as a serious reflection of our attitudes toward people of any religious background.

Q: Why would you risk offending people for the sake of selling ice cream?

A: We never intend to offend people. However, we do understand that our branding can be seen as provocative and some people may not appreciate it. We hope people see that our overall goal is to bring joy to people through our products, customer service and branding.

Q: If your intent is not to offend, why does your logo contain an upside-down cross and a lightning bolt— clear icons of anti-Christian beliefs?

A: The irony of something trivial, like ice cream, being paired with taboo iconography is a part of our branding as an edgy ice cream shop. Our branding doesn't aim to make any statement about any religion, Christian or otherwise. We understand that it is provocative, but Sweet Jesus respects and encourages religious differences.

Q: Does your company exclude Christians?

A: Our company welcomes people of all religious beliefs. Our name and branding is centered around the secular meaning behind the phrase "Sweet Jesus" and imagery that is taboo for society as a whole, not just Christians. We respect people's right to avoid something that they

may find personally offensive. We do not intend to exclude Christians and we aim to bring people together through our products.

Audiences

- Christians who are offended by the current branding and threatening to boycott
 - Losing their business isn't the main concern, because many of them probably didn't go to Sweet Jesus in the first place. This is an opportunity to change their minds and get them to try Sweet Jesus.
 - We need to prevent them from giving current or potential customers a bad impression of Sweet Jesus.
 - They're the "victim" in this case, so we need to be empathetic and respectful to them. We need to express our commitment to inclusivity to them.
- Non-Christians who are potential customers
 - Show them that we are an inclusive company, while also maintaining our signature branding. This crisis is an opportunity to get free and increased advertising that could reach new potential customers. Our current fan base was drawn to our marketing, and we wouldn't want to miss out on other customers by changing the marketing now.
- Christians who aren't mad but are potential customers
 - Show that we respect their beliefs. In our response to the crisis, we need to make sure that we don't offend people who weren't offended in the first place.
- Young people, 16–24
 - These are the people drawn to edgy branding and our over-the-top desserts. Our response may be aimed at an older, more conservative group. However, when

leveraging the publicity from this crisis, our messages should be aimed toward people ages 16–24.

- Canadians near stores
 - Most of the stores are in Canada, so there are more stakeholders there.
 - Our long-time fans are most likely located there, and they could aid response efforts through grassroots communication.
- Americans near the Baltimore store and any upcoming locations
 - We need to maintain a positive reputation in the new store in Baltimore, as well as across the United States. People in the U.S. may be less familiar with Sweet Jesus and we want to tell our story before opponents tell it first.

References

Byrne, J.A. (2018, March 31). Christians wage war against Sweet Jesus. *New York Post*.

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