

Case Study: *He Gets Us* Integrated Marketing Communications

7.2 Final Project: Course Case Study

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Abstract

The “He Gets Us” integrated marketing campaign (IMC) is a large-scale effort to bring Jesus Christ to the attention of a politically and religiously divided audience. The used emotionally charged ads across television, social media, and other platforms to drive home the point that Jesus understands and loves all people. The ads depicted people dealing with a variety of struggles, and various life complexities. The core message was that Jesus “gets us”, making him a relatable figure. The ad campaign received wide attention due mostly to its large budget, even appearing in a high dollar Super Bowl commercial. The campaign has sparked much debate since the image of Jesus is very contemporary and goes against some religious interpretations. It was also criticized for being political instead of ideological.

Introduction

Since the dawn of Christianity, the image of Jesus Christ has been shaped and altered to meet the agenda of various factions who use Him as a figurehead for their cause. Initially, the apostles pointed to Jesus as an example of how to lead a pious life. Later, the Roman Catholic Church retooled the image of Jesus to help it keep the masses obedient, using Him more as a benchmark of how their lives fell short of being perfect Christians. After a while, Christianity split into different churches, each reinterpreting Jesus Christ to comply with their message. At times, the divine perfection of Jesus was warped to accommodate sinister agendas, such as those of the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi Party. In the more than 2000 years of Christianity, the original brand of Jesus Christ as a divine and inspirational figure is almost unrecognizable. That is why the supporters of the “He Gets Us” (HGU) campaign decided to take up the task of re-branding Jesus. The HGU campaign plans to spend approximately \$1 billion in advertising to reshape the hate-filled image of Jesus painted by conservatives and the religious right, reaffirming Him as a one who loves all and forgives all (Lowe, 2023). The goal was to attract those who might not identify as Christians but can relate to a Jesus who is sympathetic to modern experiences. "This is a re-branding of Christ as a revolutionary," said Gerard J. Tellis, Professor at the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business. "It was a very troubling question, and it said, ‘How did the world's greatest love story become known as a hate group?’" (Khatun, 2023).

Integrated Marketing Campaign

To get its message out, supporters of HGU launched an Integrated Marketing Campaign, which is a coordinated strategy that used promotional tools and multiple communication platforms to spread its message, such as email, social media, television, and print (Belch, 2021). The HGU campaign used powerful, emotionally charged visuals about modern day experiences, and spread them via social media, billboards, and television. The HGU website describes the campaign as, “a movement to reintroduce people to the Jesus of the Bible and his confounding love and forgiveness. We believe his words, example, and life have relevance in our lives today and offer hope for a better future,” (Jones, 2022). An example of the thought-provoking ads is a 30-second video titled “The Influencer”. The black and white video shows a young Black man surrounded by followers during a Black Lives Matter protest in 2020. The man is shown hugging a white police officer, and violent clashes afterward. Meanwhile, the narrator says:

There was an influencer who became insanely popular. Everybody started following him. Then one day he stood up for something he believed in. People got angry. The establishment called him an extremist, said he shouldn't be allowed to share his views. They would stop at nothing to shut him up. So they did what they had to do. They nailed him to a cross.

During the last sentence, a graphic on the screen reads, “Jesus was canceled. He gets us. All of us. Jesus,” (He Gets Us, 2022). Jesus is not mentioned until the last few seconds of the ad. They intent is to have the audience identify with the modern-day influencer, then at the end make the connection that Jesus suffered a similar fate. The video received more than 12 million views on YouTube. Organizers behind the HGU campaign were not satisfied with viral success on the internet. They wanted to make a splash in the biggest advertising stage of them all. The campaign aired *The Influencer*, along with another video called *The Rebel*, which aired during the Super Bowl in 2023. It reportedly cost \$20 million dollars to air during one of most watched sporting events in the country (Khatun, 2023). The following year, HGU once again appeared during the Super Bowl, with a controversial video showing people washing the feet of anti-abortion protesters, immigrants, and others. The ad titled “Foot Washing” ended with a graphic reading, “Jesus didn't teach hate. He washed feet,” (Romano, 2024).

While the ads are polarizing, that is the intent of backers of HGU. The campaign is funded by a group called *The Signatry*, with donations coming from about 50 families wishing to remain anonymous, and David Green, founder and CEO of *Hobby Lobby*. In 2021, the *Signatry* reported net assets of nearly \$977 million (Lowe, 2023). The integrated marketing campaign calls for advertising during televised

sporting events, billboards, and online. The campaign's target audience is young liberals who watch sports. The ads also offer interested viewers a way to learn more, either by getting text messages, or connecting with a church or bible reading group. The He Gets Us website claims that their agenda is to move beyond the tensions and hatred of the current cultural climate and rediscover the love of Jesus. “We look at the biography of Jesus through a modern lens to find new relevance in often overlooked moments and themes from his life.” (He Gets Us, 2024). Professor Tellis says the campaign achieves the goal of telling a story, and being controversial, because both will bring the ads attention (Lowe, 2023). But Tellis also predicts that the campaign will not succeed because those attracted to church by the all-encompassing message of love will likely be turned off when they hear conservative homilies in those places of worship.

Marketing Strategy

Marketing Jesus is a tremendous task, especially since He is not a product owned by a company. Each church, religion, and person have their own interpretation of Jesus Christ. To sidestep theological arguments, the HGU campaign doesn't focus on the Jesus of scripture. “We’ve done a lot of homework on our culture. We researched how people feel about each other and what they think about Jesus and Christianity,” claims the He Gets Us website. “We simply want everyone to understand the authentic Jesus as he’s depicted in the Bible — the Jesus of radical forgiveness, compassion, and love,” (He Gets Us, 2024). The HGU ads use that unconditional love message to contrast with current day hate messaging, church scandals, and political polarization. The HGU website says this is not a back to church campaign. Instead, they want to help people consider Jesus and why he matters.

While the message may be altruistic, the effectiveness of the campaign still needs to be measured. As with any IMC, measuring a promotional program's effectiveness is a critical element.

Measuring the effectiveness of the promotional program is a critical element in the IMC planning process. It is necessary to determine how well a marketing campaign is working by measuring it against some standard metrics (Belch, 2021). The marketing group running the HGU campaign reports that their ads saw 4.5 million actions in the first three weeks. This includes shares, engagements, and clicks. Their videos were also viewed over 500 million times. To get a more accurate read on the campaign's effectiveness, HGU set out new key performance indicators (KPI) to measure long term success. These include looking at how the attitude towards Jesus might change after viewing the videos (Costello, 2024).

While the organizers behind the HGU campaign may be experts in religion, they recognized that they would need a professional advertising agency to shape and distribute their message. Advertising agencies are typically staffed with a variety of experts who can help market the client's message, such as writers, researchers and artists (Belch, 2021). The HGU integrated marketing campaign was developed by the BrandHaven agency, a branding firm based in Grand Haven, Michigan. The agency says its role in the HGU campaign includes:

- Audience and Market Research
- Creative Strategy
- Go-to-Market Campaign
- Resource Management

Besides the videos that aired on television and YouTube, BrandHaven created posts that appeared in social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and outdoor electronic billboards in high visibility locations like Las Vegas (BrandHaven, 2024). “Most of our messaging has been about what Jesus modeled, what he taught and what he experienced,” said Bill McKendry, founder and chief creative officer of BrandHaven. “There’s no agenda here other than we just want people to see what Jesus modeled, and we believe we would be a better society if we all learn from that,” (White, 2023).

BrandHaven president Jason Vanderground said that the campaign did extensive market research which showed that, while many Americans like Jesus, they are skeptical of his followers, who are not seen as practicing the “love one another” message that Jesus preached. “I think when we look at American Christianity now, we don’t see nearly as much of that,” said Vanderground. “And that concerns a lot of people,” (Caron, 2022).

As with any marketing campaign, the advertiser is looking for proof that the money spent on the campaign was effective in getting the message out. Likewise, the advertising agency is eager to demonstrate that the marketing plan it developed had the desired results. Assessing the effectiveness of the ad campaign has numerous advantages, such as determining if the objectives were achieved, evaluating alternative strategies, and avoiding costly mistakes (Belch, 2021). With \$20 million alone spent in the Super Bowl ads, the organizers would like to see some proof of performance before proceeding with the rest of the \$100 million campaign. To measure HGUs success, the BrandHaven team evaluated key metrics such as views for videos, social media engagement, website traffic, and internet searches (Perry, 2024).

For instance, A Google Trends analysis shows that when the HGU campaign launched in December 2021, it only garnered about four-percent of the campaign's online interest over time.

That interest bumped up to 10 percent in April 2022. But it skyrocketed to 100 percent in February 2023, when the first Super Bowl ads aired.

The campaign was unable to maintain that success, with interest dropping to about seven to eight percent in the following year. However, interest in the ad appearing in the following Super Bowl once again jumped to 89 percent.

After the buzz of that Super Bowl ad faded, it dropped back to about 10 percent of the campaign's overall interest (Google, n.d.). The Google Trends analysis shows that by far the HGU campaign's Super Bowl ads were the most effective in getting attention. And while the interest trend drops off steeply between the games, it does show an increase in retention during these non-peak periods.

Budgeting

With a war chest of about \$100 million, the campaign is in the same financial footing as big name brands like Mercedes-Benz, and Old Navy (Baer, 2023). While the HGU campaign was earmarked for the majority of those funds, the organizers felt a need to distribute the wealth among other factions who had contributed with the intent of supporting a campaign that would raise awareness of Christian values. The IMC planning model incorporates a two-way interaction between communication analysis and determining the budget. Since organizations do not have unlimited budgets, that funding must be kept in mind while setting objectives. One way to establish and allocate a budget by using the objective and task method. It consists of three steps:

1. Defining the communications objectives to be accomplished.
2. Determining the specific strategies and tasks needed to attain them.
3. Estimating the costs associated with performance of these strategies and tasks.

The accumulation of these costs help determine the total budget (Belch, 2021).

In the case of the HGU campaign, its funding was allocated from the nearly \$977 million in assets managed by the Signatry. It made donations to other religious organizations, most much more conservative than HGU. Those grants included:

\$20.8 million to One Hope Inc., an international ministry based in Pompano Beach, Florida. One Hope has partnered with Toy Gun Films, which Servant helped fund with \$6.2 million.

- \$16.7 million to Alliance Defending Freedom, which is behind the campaign to limit legal protections for LGBTQ people.
- \$10.5 million to Answers in Genesis, a Kentucky group that takes a strict creationist view of the Bible and is known for its Noah's Ark-themed amusement park and its Creation Museum, which promotes Young-Earth Creationism, which claims that the Earth is only about 6,000 years old (Lowe, 2023).

In 2023, a much smaller non-profit organization called Come Near took over management of the HGU campaign (Perry, 2024). It is unclear if the new non-profit has assets as large as Signatry managed to support the HGU campaign.

Controversies

While the marketers of HGU consider the campaign successful, it has also been maligned by Christian conservatives for using “woke” themes, and by the ideological left for the campaign's financial ties to groups traditionally seen as anti LGBTQ+. It should be noted that the HGU website states that “Jesus loves gay, and Jesus loves trans people,” and all are invited to explore the story of Jesus (Perry, 2024).

Consumer behavior

Consumer behavior can be defined as the process and activities people engage in when searching for, selecting, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing of products and services to satisfy their needs and desires. For many products and services, purchase decisions are the result of a long, detailed process that may include an extensive information search, brand comparisons and evaluations, and other activities.

ENVIRONMENTAL INFLUENCES ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The broadest and most abstract of the external factors that influence consumer behavior is culture, or the complexity of learned meanings, values, norms, and customs shared by members of a society. Cultural norms and values offer direction and guidance to members of a society in all aspects of their lives, including their consumption behavior. It is becoming increasingly important to study the impact of culture on consumer behavior as marketers expand their international marketing efforts. Each country has certain cultural traditions, customs, and values that marketers must understand as they develop marketing programs.

Marketers must also be aware of changes that may be occurring in a particular culture and the implications of these changes for their advertising and promotional strategies and programs. American culture continually goes through many changes that have direct implications for advertising. Marketing

researchers monitor these changes and their impact on the ways companies market their products and services

SOURCE FACTORS

LO 6-2

The source component is a multifaceted concept. When Tina Fey appears in a commercial for American Express, is the source Fey herself, the company, or some combination of the two? And, of course, consumers get information from friends, relatives, and neighbors; in fact, personal sources may be the most influential factor in a purchase decision. Word-of-mouth information transmitted from one individual to another is often perceived as more reliable and trustworthy than that received through more formal marketing channels such as advertising. As was discussed in Chapter 5, marketers are using influencers and viral marketing methods to generate favorable word-of-mouth discussion and recommendations for their products and services.³

We use the term source to mean the person involved in communicating a marketing message, either directly or indirectly. A direct source is a spokesperson who delivers a message and/or endorses a product or service, like country music star Miranda Lambert, who appears in an ad that is part of “The Breakfast Project” campaign sponsored by the Milk Processor Education Program. The campaign encourages people to eat a nutritious breakfast that includes milk (Exhibit 6–1). An indirect source, say, a model, doesn’t actually deliver a message but draws attention to and/or enhances the appearance of the ad. Some ads use neither a direct nor an indirect source; the source is the organization with the message to communicate. Since most research focuses on individuals as a message source, our examination of source factors follows this approach

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