

# MARKETING IN THE AGE OF OUTRAGE

INDUSTRY TRENDS    MARKETING IN THE AGE OF OUTRAGE



America is a melting pot of cultures and lifestyles that is evolving every day, and it's fascinating. Part of that evolution is achieving equal treatment and opportunities for all. While equality is a noble and important goal, the country is treading into uncharted territory. Territory where, if a person is offended in any way, then they believe that their rights have been violated and someone has to pay. I call it the age of outrage.

I want to be clear that I am not referring to prejudice, crime, or violence based on race, gender, or cultural differences. Those are indeed rights violations. This is only about individuals deciding what is and isn't offensive to them regardless of their background, and how they react.

Comedians, public figures, advertising campaigns, and unpopular opinions are plentiful. It's pretty easy to get offended, but that should be okay. There is nothing in the US Constitution that says you have the right to go through life without ever feeling uncomfortable. That is not equality. That is a person's inability to cope with emotions and function when faced with disagreement. What I'm wondering is: Is the world more offensive than it used to be, or did we become more sensitive? Does every offense require outrage?

Comedian Amy Schumer came under fire last year for what many would expect from her. She has a reputation for telling off-color jokes on topics such as sex, gender, race, and relationships. Here is the joke that put her on the hot seat.

Schumer: “I used to date Hispanic guys, but now I prefer consensual.”

Yes, that is offensive against Hispanic people and Schumer faced some backlash for it. She initially pushed back against the criticism, saying that making people uncomfortable is part of her comedy. She would later offer an apology to anyone who was offended.

A comedian has quite a unique role in the age of outrage. Being controversial, provocative, and even offensive is a big part of many comedians' brands. Comedians like Schumer, Chris Rock, Daniel Tosh, Louis CK, and many others have made several unapologetically offensive jokes. They are sometimes even praised for their fearlessness. Most eventually do apologize.

Anthony Jeselnik is notoriously outspoken against apologizing for any of his jokes. He simply won't do it. As expected, he has a provocative take on those who demand apologies.

He also has strong opinions on how people use social media. (NSFW – language)

Comedians can get themselves out of trouble fairly easily for telling offensive jokes. After all, they're just jokes. That's their job as well as their excuse, and an apology is just about all it takes to get out of the crosshairs. But what about the rest of us? If you own a business, an off-color joke or unpopular opinion can cost you your livelihood. If you're a marketer, a provocative ad can gain you some negative attention and maybe ruin your career. Your employer could see your opinions or actions as detrimental to the company, and fire you. In fact, former MLB pitcher Curt Schilling recently lost his job in this manner. He was a baseball analyst for ESPN. Known for being outspoken and opinionated, he was fired for sharing a photo and commentary on the North Carolina law on transgender bathrooms.

That seems to be the goal of the outrage. Someone must pay for being offensive. It's not enough that you're offended and taking a stand. Everyone must know and more people must join the cause.

Enter social media. Soapboxes for all! Don't get me wrong. Social media is an amazing thing, but it's also a powerful weapon in the age of outrage. Consumers have more ways than ever to voice their outrage. Before, they could let their actions do the talking by changing the channel, spending their money elsewhere, or registering formal complaints. Now their actions are backed up with what you could call campaigns. People can share the offensive material to increase awareness, denounce it publicly, and rally support against the offender with just a few clicks.

There is a particular audience for any given comedian. The same goes for any given product or service. You may not be able to please everyone, but you have to know your target audience. If you offend them, you could be in trouble. Amy Schumer knows that her audience will appreciate her sense of humor, but outsiders may not. Businesses could have the same attitude, but will typically make more of an attempt to avoid outrage.

There are several questions to be asked about this state of affairs, and we're not going to find all the answers here. This is merely an exploration. Everyone

will draw their own conclusions, but it's certainly an intriguing topic. A few questions to ponder:

- **Is social media to blame?** The social tools that were originally created to

connect us all have become wedges to drive us apart and distance us from reality. Maybe it's the increased visibility. Social media has provided a platform that we didn't have in the past. Anyone can publish their outrage on the internet for the world to see.

- **Is the world more offensive or are we more sensitive?** The world is constantly changing. People are constantly changing. It's hard to say which is the stimulus for the age of outrage. The increased presence and use of social media is certainly enabling more visibility for social issues and the subsequent outrage. Some say that people nowadays don't have enough "real" problems and are creating outrage out of "little" things. Others may say that the problems existed all along, and that people now have the means and support to bring them to light and drive change. It should also be noted that as the world and its people evolve, new issues arise that may not have existed in the past.

I love and hate this topic at the same time. As someone who works in the marketing field and uses social media for business, this is interesting and terrifying at the same time. Many of us are trying to find ways to safely be provocative, funny, and opinionated without offending anyone as we brand ourselves and our employers/clients. Do we push the envelope in the hopes of viral glory? Or do we play it safe and avoid the outrage? Like I said, we're not going to find all the answers right now, but we have to consider the potential reactions to everything we do. Just know this: If you're willing to be outrageous, be prepared for the outrage.

Sources:

<http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc/amy-schumer-taking-responsibility-controversial-joke>

[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/24/us/north-carolina-to-limit-bathroom-use-by-birth-gender.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/24/us/north-carolina-to-limit-bathroom-use-by-birth-gender.html?_r=0)