

The Clydesdales: Bud Light's unexpected brand pooper scooper

Mark Vandegrift | Special to the [Canton Repository](#)

If you participated in the Pro Football Hall of Fame festivities, chances are you spotted Anheuser-Busch's Clydesdales.

These majestic animals graced our community, a privilege few cities enjoy each year. We were blessed they were here for two weeks, which we're told is a rare length of stay for the crew.

Local leaders were concerned about how Canton might receive them, given the recent mismanagement of the Bud Light brand. However, to our credit, the feedback has been overwhelmingly positive.

Kudos to you, Canton for separating a bad brand move by Anheuser-Busch's management from these amazing creatures. And kudos to the Clydesdales for acting as the brand pooper scooper for Bud Light's recent "droppings." You horses have a lot of work to do, and you might be one of very few options the company has left to clean up its mess.

Bud Light stepped in a fresh one

If we set politics and values aside, Bud Light's marketing fiasco reminds us that violating basic marketing principles can cost you a lot more than advertising dollars. With its loss of more than \$16 billion in market cap (as of July 31), Anheuser-Busch learned a marketing strategy lesson the hard way.

Most analysis will point to the politics and values Bud Light's marketing team decided to adopt. However, the marketing misstep has a more basic explanation. Bud Light broke two foundational marketing principles, which are:

- Perception is reality. Marketing is a battle of perceptions, not products. Marketing battles are fought inside the mind of the prospect. There is no objective reality. There are no facts. The better product doesn't win. The better perception wins.
- Never leave your core customer behind. If you decide to make the difficult decision to change the target audience of your brand, know it's one of the most challenging marketing efforts you will ever employ. However, unless you want to lose your job (reference to the Bud Light marketing team), never drop a fresh one on your existing customer base.

How did Bud Light's marketing team break these principles? Let's start with the second principle that was broken: leaving your core customer behind.

Fratty and out-of-touch

Alissa Heinerscheid, vice president of marketing, called Bud Light's existing customer base "fratty" and "out-of-touch." While she can hold any opinion she wishes of Bud Light's core audience, her big mistake was assuming she could reposition the brand from patriotic, traditional American values to a new value Bud Light's core customer doesn't share.

Setting politics and values aside, this is a clear violation of principle No. 2. But she isn't the first to make such a huge misstep.

Remember New Coke? If you're old enough, you remember that fiasco.

Coke decided it wanted to be the "new thing" without regard for its traditional customer base who desired "the original." Pepsi's move to reposition Coke as the "old thing" scared the Coke team and resulted in a major strategic error.

Instead of doubling down and appreciating its core customer, Coke threw away the old recipe and told everyone to drink its new recipe. Fail. The original Coke returned within six months with a lot of making up to do.

Bud Light didn't change its formula or come out with "New Bud Light." Instead, the brand's move communicated to its core customers that they were no longer valued. Brand loyalty be condemned.

Anheuser-Busch has since run ads touting its patriotic values, but can it save sales? Initial returns are no, this misstep was simply too egregious. However, time seems to heal all wounds, and customers tend to be forgiving. The iconic Clydesdales will play a big part of that effort and we were fortunate to enjoy their presence in Canton.

Perception is ... perception

This first violation of leaving Bud Light's core customer behind leads us to the second principle that was broken.

Like Starbucks, or Tesla, where simply possessing them is a sign of prestige, Bud Light represented (yes, past tense) values that were part of the identity of its core customer.

Did Bud Light — in reality — equal American values? No, but the perception existed in the mind and that's where differentiated ideas live. To many, holding a Bud Light told others, "I am a patriot."

Throwing away these values in place of new values to make a political statement was the wrong marketing move, regardless of where you stand in the political spectrum. Sadly, it hasn't been the top executives who have lost their jobs.

Six hundred production line workers did about a month ago, then just this week, another 380 jobs were axed, this time from lower and middle management. To add insult to injury, since the blunder, Bud Light lost its position to Modelo as the nation's best-selling beer.

Canton, we have a lot of great businesses here. Value them. Business leaders, please be careful about making monumental marketing moves solely driven by perceived societal shifts. You won't have the Clydesdales around to scoop that poop.

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