

The Campaign to Engage with Online Consumers:
Analysis of the Success of the Dove Real Beauty Campaign

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Abstract

The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty is one of the most successful advertising campaigns of the 21st century due to a relationship of constant online engagement between the Dove brand and the brand community. Through modification of previous discourses concerning consumer selection, the value of female beauty, and authenticity of content, Dove appears as a progressive brand offering an alternative path for the woman who wants to be empowered. However, it is not too radical in changing the discourse completely; the campaign continues a culture of exclusivity and focus on female physical beauty. The females who relate to these discourses form the brand community. The brand community then shapes the Dove brand online through brand engagement, addition of community members, and continuation of Dove's discourse by making content go viral. It is argued that Dove's Real Beauty Campaign could not be successful without the online brand community.

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Advertising now permeates almost all aspect of life as there are increased mediums for advertisements to appear. The Internet, in particular, opened a new gateway for advertising to enter the psyche. In the past, commercials appeared in select time slots on television or on specific areas in a newspaper or magazine. Now advertisements do not even need to appear on television or in print; they can exist solely on the web. With the rise of social media, a corporation can post a video on YouTube and then let it be shared across a variety of web outlets, from blogs, to Facebook, to Twitter. Some advertising campaigns primarily exist on the Internet and rarely, if ever, appear offline. Online advertisements may be classified as “sticky” (Marantz). The goal is to create something that will generate clicks, which means it generates traffic.

The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty is one of the most, if not *the* most, successful advertising campaigns of the 21st century (“Top Ad Campaigns of the 21st Century”). One video for the campaign, Dove’s *Real Beauty Sketches*, was the most viral video of 2013 (Papandrea; Stamper; Toure). Yet, the campaign exists almost entirely online. There were some print advertisements created, but the most well known aspects of the campaign are the videos posted online. As many advertisements rely on offline engagement, the success of a campaign designed almost entirely for the Internet invites a deeper examination. What makes the Dove Real Beauty Campaign so successful that it is regarded as one of the most successful advertising campaigns of the 21st century, and why did it go so viral?

The success of the campaign can be partially attributed to the brand Dove creates around modification of traditional advertising discourses concerning consumer inclusion, value of

female beauty, and authenticity. This brand invites a specific type of consumer – namely a female wanting to be included in a world of unrealistic beauty standards – to create the brand community. By placing most of the campaign content online and encouraging consumer brand engagement, Dove moves the brand community online. Once the brand community has been established online, consumers continue the discourse and become producers of the brand.

History of the Campaign

The Dove Real Beauty Campaign began in 2004 with the intention of “broadening the definition of beauty by challenging stereotypical conventions” (Dove). Dove published a series of photos of women who did not fit within the popular definitions of models; these were women who were older, curvier, and freckled. In 2005 they released their “real women in the spotlight campaign” (Dove). This campaign focused on the variety of body types that exist but that are rarely pictured in magazines. They sought to break down the idealization of the thin body that society cherishes. The beginning of the campaign focused on breaking down the stereotypes that exist for women.

The next step in the campaign began in 2006 with the release of several videos that demonstrated the effects of unrealistic standards set by the beauty industry. They released a short film titled “Little Girls” that demonstrated to parents the consequences of the high, unrealistic standards of the beauty industry (Dove). Their film “Evolution” displayed how easy it was for unrealistic beauty standards to be created. “Evolution” was the first video to mark the success of the campaign (Neff).

The campaign took off after these videos. In 2007 Dove created a pro-age campaign that featured women over 50 with tag lines such as “too many age spots to be in an anti-aging

ad” (Dove). The same year they released a video called “Onslaught” in which a young girl is bombarded with messages that heighten insecurity about her looks (Dove). Dove then focused more on self-esteem workshops for women.

The campaign quieted down for a few years until 2013 in which Dove released two videos, one of which was its most viral video yet. The first video released was relatively successful; it was titled “Camera Shy” and intended to “remind women to recapture the feeling they had when they were young and fearless in front of the camera” (Dove). After that was the release of Dove’s Real Beauty Sketches, which became the most viral video advertisement ever (Papandrea; Stamper; Toure). The latest installment of Dove’s campaign is “Selfie”, which is a video about a workshop that encourages people to take photos and post the pictures on social media. As “Selfie” indicates, the Real Beauty Campaign progressively moved more online as its success grew.

Campaign Discourse

In order to understand why the Dove Real Beauty Campaign went so viral, first there must be an understanding of the discourse of the campaign. Dove carefully cultivates its brand identity through the discourse of the Real Beauty campaign. A brand refers to “the intersecting relationship between marketing, a product, and consumers” and are “about culture as much as they are about economics” (Banet-Weiser 4). Audiences use brands to define and organize themselves in the world. Dove’s brand is one related to consumer empowerment and progressive movements. Through its discourse concerning consumer inclusion, the value of female beauty, and authenticity, Dove creates its brand. These discourses are not new discourses created by the

Dove campaign; they modified existing discourses to appear more appealing and progressive to possible consumers of the brand.

Consumer Inclusion

The first discourse Dove seeks to begin is one that involves including a wider variety of consumers through its acceptance of “real” women. Most women are not models, but models are the only women seen in advertisements for products intended for the average women.

Consequently, the Dove Real Beauty Campaign Dove uses “real” women in its campaign as a means of consumer inclusion. The Dove Real Beauty Campaign is often contrasted with the Victoria’s Secret Love My Body Campaign, although Victoria’s Secret’s “Love My Body” was a metaphor for loving their product called a body bra, not a campaign for loving one’s physical appearance. Whereas the Dove campaign uses a wider range of women, the Victoria’s Secret models are all traditional, skinny models.

On one hand, the Dove campaign is more inclusive than most advertising because it *does* include women who do not fit the traditional schema of models. The women featured are heavier and curvier than most models. Many Dove models are a wide range of ethnicities and ages. Part of the campaign includes photographs that feature women of varied appearances, such as a young freckled girl or an older grey-haired women, next to a box that describes their appearances in either positive or negative light, i.e. “flawed? or flawless?” for a freckled girl and “grey? or gorgeous?” for an older women. These break the normal routine of modeling in advertisements. By expanding the definition of who can be a model, Dove brands itself as inclusive of all consumers.

However, Dove is not nearly as inclusive as it may initially appear. The definition of who qualifies as a model may be more expansive than before, but it still excludes a good deal of consumers. The first group of consumers Dove fires is anybody who is not a cisgender female. Cisgender males are the most prominent members of the excluded group, which Dove realizes, as evidenced by Dove's separate line of products specifically for men called "Men + Care" (Dove). Dividing products into male and female categories excludes any transgender consumers, especially those who do not identify as either male or female. Transgender women hypothetically could fit within Dove's model of consumer inclusion except that they are never featured in any advertisements, although measures are taken to include a range of cisgender women.

Even within this group of cisgender females, Dove fires categories of consumers. Compared to traditional commercials, Dove may have an inclusive range of models. However, Dove's range of models is not representative of diverse women. Many of the women selected for Dove's commercials fit within the popular definition of physical beauty in today's Western culture. Dove's models are predominately thin, white women. They do feature a range of ethnicities, but no more than other advertising. When comparing the previously mentioned Dove Real Beauty Campaign photograph and Victoria's Secret "Love My Body" photograph, approximately only 30% of the women featured in both photographs are ethnic minorities. That said, Dove does not base its brand on ethnic diversity; the basis of the brand is representing "real, everyday" women. But is ethnic diversity not representative of real, everyday women? Furthermore, although there are heavier and curvier women in the campaign, there are no women who are too overweight. This is not exactly representative of the everyday female as over half of

all American women are a size 14 or larger (Zernike). None of the women have fat rolls or skin flaps or cellulite; no matter the weight, all the women have smooth skin. Some women featured in commercials have wrinkles or freckles, but beyond that all the women have pristine faces. There are no women with acne or skin discolorations or even large pores. The perfection of faces is particularly significant because “the face holds the central role in contextualizing beauty”, and a woman’s face is often compared to the rest of her body (Johnson 110). In limiting the range of facial beauty that is acceptable, Dove limits the definition of what women can be considered beautiful overall.

Perhaps the best example of Dove’s firing of consumers can be seen in their most viral video of the campaign: the Real Beauty Sketches. In this video an FBI-trained sketch artist draws two pictures of the same woman. In one picture, the woman describes herself, and in the other a stranger describes the woman. The sketch artist never sees the woman. After both sketches are complete, the pictures are placed side-by-side. Through comparison of the unattractive self-described portrait and the attractive stranger-described portrait, the women see that “they are more beautiful than [they] think” (Dove). All the faces are much thinner in the “attractive” portrait, and generally have fuller lips, brighter eyes, and fewer imperfections, such as bags under the eyes. The stranger-described portraits all fit in with the traditional, Western definition of beauty. These are the images the women are supposed to use to define their own beauty. Since the stranger-described portraits are the “more beautiful” ones, the message is that traditional Western beauty is still the best form of beauty. However, not all women fit in with the traditional definition of beauty. People have round faces and bags under their eyes and moles on their faces, but the elimination of these in the Real Beauty Sketches, coupled with the statement that

essentially says elimination of such imperfections constitutes beauty, ends up excluding any women with these “imperfections”. The women selected for Dove’s Real Beauty Campaign were women who thought they did not belong in the definition of traditional beauty, and Dove pushed to include them. Any women who does not fit within this definition of attractiveness is fired from Dove’s campaign.

Value of the Female Body

Dove brands itself as a feminist company that cares more about improving girl’s self-esteem than it does about selling goods, but through its discussion of beauty Dove only continues the previous discourses concerning the value of the female body. Dove defines beauty as something based on physical appearance rather than focusing on internal beauty. Granted, if they truly seek to improve girl’s self-esteem, focusing on female physical beauty is not a terrible focal point for the campaign because body image is tied to self-esteem for most people (Celebre & Denton 2). Previous studies found that internalization of the thin ideal can begin as early as three years old and 6 out of 10 teenage girls believe they would be happier if they were thinner (Celebre & Denton 2). If Dove hopes to improve female self-esteem, improving body image is one of the most logical places to start. Dove’s Self-Esteem Toolkit is an online resource that is aimed entirely at improving girl’s self-esteem through workshops, activities, and guides that focus on standards of physical beauty (Dove). Continuing discourse of the female body allows Dove to better critique the media standards placed on women and show how women do not need to meet these unrealistic standards in order to be physically beautiful, but it also ends up perpetuating discourse that states there is value in the female body.

Seeing as the name of Dove's campaign is the Real Beauty Campaign, it is not surprising that creating more realistic beauty standards is the focus of the entire campaign, even if these standards only involve physical beauty. The name of the campaign does not immediately allude to beauty standards for females only, but that ends up being the case through Dove's consumer firing. Because Dove fires male consumers from the campaign, the result is that it defines physical beauty as a female value.

Even if Dove has fully authentic intentions to improve self-esteem, the ultimate goal of the company is to sell soap. Dove can include as many consumers as they may please, but if there is not a product to sell then there will be no purpose for the consumers. In order to connect soap to the campaign for beauty, Dove commodifies beauty and the body. According to Marx and Goldman, the commodity-form "redefines social relations as transactions" so products become defined as signs of social interactions (Goldman 17). Modern advertising encourages audiences "to consume, not the product, but its sign" (Goldman 19). In the commodification of beauty, buying a type of soap ends up representing buying beauty or buying a type of body.

Dove commodifies beauty with the Real Beauty Campaign through the attachment of its products to the campaign. Dove sells products such as "skin-firming lotion" to get rid of wrinkles and cellulite. These products are intended to make consumers feel more beautiful. However, in order for consumers to feel the need to buy products to make them more beautiful, they must to feel the need to be more beautiful. Dove creates this need to be beautiful through their discussion in the Real Beauty Campaign. Although the campaign concerns making women feel beautiful naturally, not all women can feel beautiful naturally. Because the basis of the campaign is that

women should feel beautiful, those that do not feel beautiful can turn to Dove's products in order to fulfill this need for beauty.

In commodifying beauty, Dove ends up individualizing the quest for beauty rather than focusing on the social factors involved in beauty standards. If people can buy conditioner to make them feel beautiful, then "individuality is expressed in the unique package of satisfied wants each person has accumulated" (Goldman 17). For example, if a consumer suffers from low self-esteem, it is a problem that can be fixed by buying "the right combination of products", like Dove shampoo and conditioner, because these products symbolize attainment "of beauty and youthfulness" (Johnson 106). Yet, in reality, it is a problem based on societal expectations of beauty in females. Through individualizing beauty, Dove suggests that "dismantling global issues that affect women is as easy as choosing the right face wash" (Banet-Weiser 41). The personalization of beauty problems "privileges individual experience over systematic problems" (Banet-Weiser 42).

Therefore, although the Dove Real Beauty Campaign may truly wish to raise self-esteem in women, it must also place value in female physical beauty in order to sell products. The commodification of beauty is not unique to Dove, they simply continue the conversation. Dove admits that the industry sets unrealistic standards for women, but they simultaneously say that feeling physically beautiful is something women should perceive to be important. They also say women should feel beautiful despite these unrealistic standards. They suggest that an answer to feeling beautiful begins with an individual feeling beautiful, and that an individual can feel beautiful if she buys the right soap.

Authenticity

Dove's Real Beauty Campaign seeks to foster engagement with the consumer and build a relationship. Like any relationship, there must be trust built between the company and the consumer. In order to build trust with the consumers, Dove must brand itself as authentic. Discourses of authenticity are far from new; many advertisements hope to appear honest and trustworthy, and the techniques used to build authenticity vary between commercials. Dove's techniques of maintaining authenticity are similar to past techniques, particularly techniques used in the 1960s with the selling of the Volkswagen Beetle.

In the 1960s, the Doyle Dane Bernbach company revolutionized advertising with their campaign for the Volkswagen Beetle because they took into account existing consumer skepticism towards commercials and added this skepticism to the discourse of the advertisement (Frank 63). The Volkswagen commercials admitted that the industry idealizes the quality of products and taught consumers to read ads critically (Frank 64). The discourse that began with Volkswagen was one that said "advertisers are liars, except, of course, this one" (Frank 65). In pointing out the idealizations in the industry, the company came across as a more honest, authentic resource in a world of scammers.

In following a similar pattern in the battle for authenticity, the Dove Real Beauty Campaign is the Volkswagen campaign of the 21st century. The commercial that really marks the beginning of Dove's battle for authenticity is their 2006 video titled "Evolution". In this video an everyday woman steps in front of a camera and is quickly transformed into a photo on a billboard before one's eyes. The audience watches as a hair and makeup crew come in, a photo-shoot occurs, and then a photo undergoes extensive photoshop. The woman's neck is lengthened, lips filled out, eyes adjusted and so forth. The video ends with the photo displayed on a billboard

on the street. In this simple, yet powerful, video Dove shows audiences how easy it is to transform an average women into something that is not even achievable without photoshop. Acknowledging the possibility of such transformation is the first step Dove takes in a discussion of the unrealistic standards set by the beauty industry.

In pointing out the deceit in the marketplace, Dove brands itself as authentic. Dove markets itself as a guiding light in a world full of liars. As they point a finger at what others are doing to destroy marketplace authenticity, Dove not only appears more authentic but it also serves as a diversion for any less than authentic techniques they might use, such as the firing of consumers who do not fit within the popular ideal of beauty. In positioning itself as a guiding light, Dove builds a bond with consumers. In order for any of Dove's other discourses concerning consumer inclusion, commodification of beauty, and beauty as a female value to be effective, there must be a consumer bond based on trust. Without belief in the honesty of the campaign, consumers may be inclined to disregard the other discourses completely because they will pass it off as further deceit in the marketplace. In order to be seen as an activism campaign, and not just a marketing campaign, Dove must appear authentic.

Making a Discourse Go Viral

The success of the Dove Real Beauty Campaign partially stems from the brand cultivated from these discourses. The combination of all these discourses results in a social activism brand that seeks to empower women through the purchase of their products. Consumers interact with the brand culture by choosing to purchase Dove products. Through modifying previously established discourses, Dove can better define its brand as one that is progressive and empowering. If they were to begin a new discourse altogether, consumers might feel alienated

and turned off at such radical thought. Consumers can relate to the familiarity of the discourse and then feel empowered by the modifications the new discourse offers. Some consumers might even be able to position themselves as part of an inner, knowledgeable circle that is aware the modifications were made, and thus feel further empowered. Through this brand culture and discourse, Dove attracts a specific type of consumer: a female who wants to feel included in a society that commodifies beauty and wants a trustworthy company to be the gateway to that inclusion.

The campaign focuses on building relationships with a consumer rather than on discussing the benefits of the product quality, so it seeks to create a brand community. A brand community is “based on a structured set of social relationships among admirers of a brand” and is marked by “shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility” (Muniz and O’Guinn 412). Those involved in a brand community have a shared identity. The Dove brand community identity can be marked by a desire for authenticity in the world of marketing, a need for inclusion, and a belief in the value of female beauty. Community members put great value on all these ideals in order to have a “consciousness of kind”, or an “intrinsic connection that members feel towards one another” that is based on “a way of thinking about things that is more than shared attitudes or perceived similarity” (Muniz & O’Guinn 413). This consciousness of kind is the basis of the Dove brand community.

The key factor in the Dove brand community, compared to other communities, is the high level of online involvement. Essentially, the Dove brand community has moved online. Studies found that online brand communities share the same characteristics - shared consciousness, shared rituals and traditions, and social obligations - as offline brand communities (Habibi,

Laroche, and Richard 127). Online brand communities also have a positive effect on “value creation markers”; these enhance brand loyalty due to engagement with the brand, which further instills the values associated with it (Laroche et al. 1765). Online brand communities are marked by high levels of brand engagement, such as posting about the brand on social media sites like Facebook (Zheng et al. 98). This engagement with the brand positively influences brand loyalty as users are more inclined to focus on the benefits of the brand rather than the costs (Zheng et al. 103).

Most of the Dove Real Beauty Campaign is online, so brand community members must engage with it in an online community. Seeing as the brand community exists predominately online, it results in higher brand loyalty as users can constantly engage with the brand. Dove also tailors the campaign for high levels of brand engagement. Dove’s online Self-Esteem Toolkit is a key aspect of the brand. The focus of the Self-Esteem Toolkit is for women to engage with the brand through participation in online activities, or reading the guidebooks, or taking part in workshops (Dove). Dove also promotes hashtags, such as #speakbeautiful, to be used on Twitter so users can interact with the brand even when away from the Dove website (Dove). Dove then adds pictures of the #speakbeautiful Tweets they receive to their website; some of the images include photographs users take of themselves with captions as to why they feel beautiful (Dove). Consequently, the online brand community consists of viewing the actual members of the community rather than just reading shared ideas of the community; thus, the result is that the community ends has real faces attached to it.

All of these aspects foster engagement with the brand within members of the community, but in order to gather more community members, Dove must create content that can be shared

with members outside of the community. Twitter hashtags can be used to share content with members outside of the community, but hashtags are generally limited to the world of Twitter as the purpose of them is so users can find Tweets with similar hashtags. The trademark of the Dove Real Beauty Campaign are the viral videos. Other advertising campaigns have had videos go viral, such as the Old Spice commercials or Apple's Mac vs. PC advertisements, but these videos existed on television and were then put online ("Top Ad Campaigns"). Dove's Real Beauty videos are unique in that they are designed for and exist solely online. They are videos created with the intention of going viral.

Television advertisements and videos created with the intention of going viral differ in a few respects. When advertising on television, companies must buy a segment of air time and must limit the advertisement to the length of this time-slot. Television advertisements are often based on repetitiveness and are more effective over time (Golan & Zaidner 962). Viral marketing has more freedom than television commercials; since there is no time-slot bought, they can be as long as they want. However, because there is no definite media slot, advertisers rely on people sharing the content. If the content is boring, then people will not share it (Golan & Zaidner 962). In order to encourage sharing the content, most advertising relies on techniques that are based on the ritual view of communication. Specifically, it relies on a ritual view of communication that focuses on the "individual's perceptions of whom they are (or whom they want to be)" (Golan & Zaidner 967). Viral advertising relies on "provocative content" significantly more than traditional advertising (Porter & Golan 28). Provocative content results in strong emotional connotations attached to the content in the video. Viral videos with a positive emotional tone have the strongest positive audience attitude towards the video and brand, and result in the highest level of

sharing (Eckler & Bolls). Therefore, the most successful viral marketing videos are those with emotionally positive provocative content that focuses on an individual's perceptions of who they are or want to be.

Dove's Real Beauty videos certainly meet the criteria for a successful viral video. Most of the videos focus on how an individual perceives herself in a world of unrealistic beauty standards. Challenging traditional societal displays of beauty results in provocative content. The videos have a positive emotional tone through encouraging females to love and appreciate their beauty and realize that everybody is beautiful. Dove's Real Beauty Sketches is perhaps the most viral video of the campaign because it best encompasses this criteria. However, all the videos that are part of Dove's Real Beauty Campaign meet this criteria in some capacity, whether they are encouraging young girls to take selfies to feel beautiful or exhibiting how much children love taking photos and reminding women that they can be equally fearless (Dove). Once a video has gone viral it will be shared on multiple social media platforms, from Facebook to Twitter to blogs. A viral video does not require members of the brand community to share the video; it will hopefully continue to be shared by members outside of the brand community (Zheng et al. 104). If it is truly effective, a video will result in new members of the brand community as people sharing the video will have higher levels of loyalty to the brand.

Through the combination of viral videos, Twitter hashtags, and online activities, Dove encourages high brand engagement. The majority of Dove's brand engagement occurs online because Dove releases most of the content online instead of offline. The result of high brand engagement online is that the consumers become producers of the content (Banet-Weiser). Consumers are the ones sharing the videos on Facebook or using #speakbeautiful or participating

in Dove's workshops. Without the consumer produced content, the Dove Real Beauty Campaign could not survive online; audiences "help build the brand" "through their consumer-generated content" (Banet-Weiser 39). Therefore, Dove relies on the brand community to build its own brand.

Conclusion

The success of the Dove Real Beauty Campaign can be attributed to a relationship of constant engagement between the Dove brand and the brand community. In order to attract a specific type of community member, Dove must first establish its brand discourse. Through modification of previous discourses concerning consumer selection, the value of female beauty, and authenticity of content Dove appears as a progressive brand that is not too radical in changing the discourse completely, but simply offering an alternative path for the woman who wants to be empowered. The brand culture invites females looking for a trustworthy voice to help include them in a society that values them for their physical beauty. The females who relate to these discourses and this brand culture form the brand community. The brand community then shapes the Dove brand online through brand engagement, addition of community members, and continuation of Dove's discourse. The community members make Dove's content go viral and the viral content allows Dove's brand culture to continue. The brand community could not exist without a brand to center itself around, but Dove's Real Beauty Campaign could not be successful without the brand community; it is a reciprocal relationship.

As more advertisers realize the power of online brand communities, there will likely be an increase in the number of advertising campaigns generated specifically for the Internet.

Dove's Real Beauty Campaign may be one of the most successful advertising campaigns of the

21st century because it is one of the first to rely almost entirely on its online brand community. However, Dove is no longer unique in all of its practices. For example, *Aeri* has released a new advertising campaign that feature non-photoshopped models with cellulite and larger stomachs. Other advertisers are releasing longer versions of television commercials on YouTube. Just as the 1960s Volkswagen commercials revolutionized the discourse of advertisements, Dove's Real Beauty Campaign may open a new age of modifying previous discourses and encouraging more reciprocal consumer-corporation relationships. Or perhaps Dove's success is an anomaly that will not be replicated. Only time will tell.

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