



#FreeCuthbert: Aldi's Very Chocolatey Crisis

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Introduction

In early 2021, a simple chocolate caterpillar caused a PR crisis in the UK. The popular grocery chain Aldi launched their brand new "Cuthbert the Caterpillar" chocolate cake to much fanfare and excitement. For UK residents, caterpillar cakes were a popular birthday tradition. However, their competition, grocery chain Marks and Spencer cried foul. Launched in 1990, they argued that their Colin the Caterpillar cake served as the beloved - and original - caterpillar cake for the masses. In this report, I will cover the situation leading up to Aldi's response and the overall outcomes of their #FreeCuthbert campaign on Twitter.

The Situation

Due to their exceedingly similar designs, Marks and Spencer planned to sue Aldi for copyright infringement. Aldi was forced to pull Cuthbert from the shelves in the very public feud with Marks and Spencer leading up to the court proceedings, but they would not back down. While Marks and Spencer sought to win in the UK's High Court, Aldi sought to win the court of public opinion.

Aldi, long known in the UK for having a humorously disruptive brand personality much like Wendy's in the US, was not amused to be dragged through the coals over birthday cake. Furthermore, they were not the first copycat on UK supermarket shelves. Cuthbert was preceded by Curly, Clyde, Cecil, and Wiggles the Caterpillar, each from different major grocery chains. This fact was also not lost on the public:



Source: Twitter

The Response

Aldi paired with the marketing agency McCann Manchester to form their crisis response. Similar to Aldi, McCann Manchester sought to make light of the situation. Staff stated that, "If we thought it was ridiculous, maybe the public would, too?" (Lim, 2022). When the lawsuit was publicly announced, Aldi started their response in the form of a social media campaign. Their first tweet parodied Marks and Spencer's "This is not just any (blank), it's Marks and Spencer" branding in the now famous announcement: "This is not just any court case, this is #FreeCuthbert." A following tweet featured Cuthbert behind bars:



Source: Twitter

Shortly after its launch. The #FreeCuthbert campaign went wildly viral. User-generated videos utilizing the hashtag gained over 30 million views, Aldi received a 30% increase in their Twitter following, and Cuthbert received press coverage on BBC Breakfast, Good Morning Britain and This Morning. On the business side, news sentiment and purchase consideration for Marks and Spencer declined dramatically, while Aldi's statistics increased. Over the course of the campaign, Aldi also reached over 35 million people on Facebook, achieved a 15% engagement rate on social media, and gained an estimated 5 million pounds worth of media spend for free.

The Results

After the wildly successful #FreeCuthbert campaign, Marks and Spencer promptly settled with Aldi out of court. In response to the settlement, Aldi tweeted: "Getting out early on good behaviour, keep an eye out for Cuthy B this Spring #FreeCuthbert." Due to the massive level of public support, Aldi brought Cuthbert back for a limited edition charity run. The #CaterpillarsForCancer campaign raised thousands of pounds for the Teenage Cancer Trust. By June 2022, Cuthbert made a triumphant return to Aldi stores in the #CuthBack campaign.



Photo: An Aldi van outside of Marks and Spencer during the #CuthBack campaign.

Conclusion

Aldi's #FreeCuthbert campaign was a masterclass not only in crisis management, but also in marketing prowess. By utilizing their brand personality and appealing to the public in a humorous and timely way, they turned the caterpillar cake war in their favor and are still reaping the benefits through increased brand engagement. Launching the campaign on Twitter was also a smart bet that enabled them to go viral nearly instantly and spread to other platforms. Additionally, they capitalized on the success of the campaign and extended it by releasing the limited edition Cuthbert cakes for charity, further generating more positive sentiment. In the marketing world, the #FreeCuthbert campaign has become a gold standard that other companies will seek to replicate if needed.



Source: Twitter

References

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