
Fwd: This Made Me Laugh

How Viral Ad Parodies Impact Your Brand

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Introduction

He who laughs last

Nothing feels as good as laughter...that is, unless you or your brand is the butt of the joke. And, while advertisers have long used humor as a means of grabbing consumer attention, these days, creative consumers use humor to poke fun at advertisers and the brands they publicize, and often to make a statement.

Call them what you will—brand parodies, brand spoofs, parody advertising or spoof marketing, they are born when a brand is the actual source of the humor. They come in all shapes and sizes. Jpeg's. Gif's. Mpeg's. Avi's. Script's. Flash. We read. We laugh. We forward.

Our web-based research uncovered over 200 different advertising spoofs ranging from simple logo morphing to more elaborate, complete reproductions of existing commercial campaigns.



"Indecent Proposal"
A MasterCard Priceless Campaign Parody
www.ifilm.com



"Bill Gates makes the switch to MAC"
www.macboy.com



"America Off-line"
www.ifilm.com

Introduction (continued)

Why should you care?

Brand Builder and Brand Microscope. Parodies are becoming a popular way for people to vent and voice their opinions. They have the potential to play an important role in branding and product development strategies. Beyond laughter and amusement, they provide a unique look into the mind of the consumer.

When a parody is positive, you may benefit from viral marketing extending your brand in the most authentic way—driven by customers. When a parody is negative or controversial, you have insight about customer dissatisfaction, product or service flaws or public opinion that could lead to negative public relations.

Easy to Make. Easy to Spread. While parodies in the early days were created by professionals (who doesn't remember the Saturday Night Live spoofs?), today, anyone with a computer, a sense of humor and a point of view can create their own professional looking advertising spoof. With a compelling and pervasive medium like the Internet, they're even easier to spread. For example, shortly after PWC Consulting decided to rename itself "Monday," the firm was acquired by IBM. Within 12 hours after the announcement, spoofs were spreading rapidly by email. In one of parodies, the company is renamed a different day of the week: "Tuesday: You wake up, IBM buys you."

Assessing the Impact on Your Brand. We'll look at the four key questions to ask when looking at a parody, and give you some tools to assess if a parody is impacting your brand—positively or negatively—and when to laugh, learn or respond.

Four Key Questions to Ask

From benign to brazen: when parodies stop being funny.

Of course not all spoofs are negative. Some have been developed simply for fun with no intention of harm or dissolution of brand. For instance, there are over 70 knock-offs of the Budweiser WHASSUP! campaign scattered throughout the web¹. One of the websites even offers tips on how to make your own parody. MasterCard's Priceless campaign is another favorite of the parody community with numerous popular takes circulating on the Web. In these cases, the spoofs pose little threat to brand integrity and may even positively enhance brand presence. However, not all spoofs are so good-natured – and that's the challenge.

What is the fine line between serious and funny? While many would say that picking the dangerous ones is an exercise in subjectivity and the intangible, we found four key areas of focus to help determine if parodies are in the brand danger zone.

Is Your Brand in the Danger Zone?

Here are four key areas of focus

1. Who/What is the **target** of the parody?
2. What is the **intent** behind the parody?
3. What is the **breadth** of the parody?
4. What is the **source** of the parody?

1. Nickell, Joe Ashbrook. May 2001. WHASSSUUP?! Shaddup! Ad parodies get viral, and Anheuser-Busch goes along for the ride. Business 2.0.

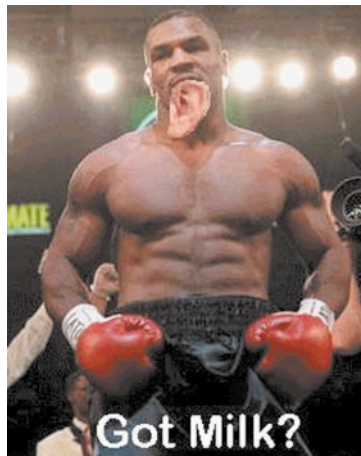
Four Key Questions to Ask (continued)

1. Who/What is the target of the parody?

Deciphering the target of the parody can help determine its level of threat to your brand. The parodies we found fell into three categories: Pop Art, Industry Specific and Brand Specific. Our research has shown that brand spoofs often reflect consumer attitudes towards social, industry, and brand-specific issues. These attitudes may provide information that could impact product development, customer care programs and cause-related marketing or public affairs strategies.

Three Categories: Pop Art. Industry Specific. Brand Specific.

- > **Pop Art.** Many parodies use brands to poke fun at certain individuals or events. There are no motives behind their creation, they simply use the brand as the platform to provide context to the parody or joke.



Four Key Questions to Ask (continued)

- > **Industry Specific.** Brands are symbols of our culture. Examples range from spoofing a consumption-driven society to questioning advertising's impact on body image. In these cases, the brand is used to question our culture and our society. The common thread here is that the most prominent brand (a symbol of the category) is most often used as the example.

The tobacco and alcohol industry are the top two sources of brand parodies.



Beauty and conformity coming to a store near you.



Four Key Questions to Ask (continued)

- > **Brand Specific.** The final and most prevalent spoof is the brand specific target which is potentially the most dangerous if negative. While the spoofs in this category are often benign in nature, those that express dissatisfaction with a company's product or service may provide insight into strong consumer values or opinions.

Brand specific spoofs that are inherently brazen in presentation or content need to be taken seriously as potential brand threats.



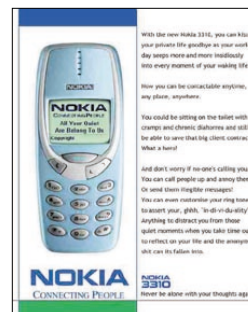
Four Key Questions to Ask (continued)

2. What is the intent behind the parody?

A good way of gauging the impact of a parody is to look at its intent. Judging intent can be difficult since humor is subjective. Here are some crucial questions to ask when you're judging intent:

- > Does the parody have an underlying tone of "don't buy?" Does the spoofer want to drive people away from your brand?
- > Is the spoofer driven by profit?
- > Is the spoof offensive not just to the brand, but also to your target audience? Would it offend your customers? Is it of a sexual nature? Political?

Take a look at these parodies and decide for yourself which ones cross the line.



Four Key Questions to Ask (continued)

3. What is the breadth of the parody?

The existence of one or two parodies scattered randomly on the web poses little threat to a brand. However, when brand parodies begin to gain momentum, resembling more of an organized campaign rather than a singular joke, there is cause for concern. An example of this is a movement called “culture jamming” which began as an activist movement in reaction to an “unhealthy onslaught of brands and consumerism.”² In order to stop the assault, culture jammers create advertising parodies with anti-corporate messages. Often, they make public displays of their antipathy like defacing real billboards and posters.

What began as an underground movement in San Francisco in the early 80s, now has a worldwide following from Canada to Australia. With the Internet, it's been even easier to spread the word. What makes “culture jamming” different from other parodies is that it is organized, underground and subversive. In the past 2 years SUVs, for their mileage and emissions, have been a popular target for culture jammers. Activists have tried everything from handing out fake parking tickets and fliers to posting “No SUV Parking” signs on streets.

How can you tell whether parodies are getting organized? Ask yourself these questions:

- > Is the parody spoof supported by a group of people?
- > Is it subversive in nature?
- > Are parodies about your brand getting more frequent or specific?
- > Do the parodies have good pass-along value?

2. Klien, Naomi. 2000. *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. Picador USA.

Four Key Questions to Ask (continued)

4. What is the source of the parody?

As we've pointed out, the Internet is a vast, disorganized parking lot of parodies. Many times, it's almost impossible to decipher their point of origin. However, you can break down the source of a spoof into two categories. Each source provides an opportunity for marketers to look at the underlying reasons that your brand or advertising is being parodied.

Internal sources

Employees are the source of many parodies. They can act as "inside sources" and vehicles to deliver sensitive correspondence like memos and emails that when leaked to friends and colleagues outside the company can be the inspiration of many parodies. Websites like vault.com base their content on the ranting and raving of disgruntled employees. While it may be impossible to stop employees from making these parodies or leaking company memos, it suggests some lessons for marketers.

- > **Employees are part of your target audience:** communication to them is critical and cannot be ignored or dismissed.
- > **Branding begins on the inside:** if internal and external communication isn't synchronized, you are opening yourself up to be "Dilbertized."
- > **Be honest and forthcoming:** employees will be the first to sense any false or misleading communication.
- > **What's the brand perception internally?** Consider internal brand measurement systems. How do your employees think you measure up to your brand messages?

External Sources

Customers are another source of spoofs. Whether they use parodies to express dissatisfaction of the product/service experience or use your brand as a vehicle for humor, parodies are viral feedback systems. Are customers unhappy with your service? Did your last advertising campaign strike a positive chord? Are your prices too high? Do customers question your values or practices? Look at the parody openly and see if it offers helpful clues.

Customer dissatisfaction is often fueled when there's a gap between advertising and reality. It comes down to an old, simple truth: promise only what you can deliver. If the brand espouses "small town" values and neighborly customer service, does it deliver on it in the store? Starbucks was ranked one of the best companies to work for in 2002. Does the customer consistently experience that while being served by a barista anywhere in the world?

Using Parodies to Dissect Consumer Opinions

By using spoofs as brand mirrors, marketers can gain insight into customer attitudes and perception. Many companies spend hundreds of thousands of dollars trying to get inside the minds of their current and potential customers. With spoofs, customers and employees are going out of their way to express their feelings towards your brand. By examining the root of these parodies, you have the opportunity to address any gaps between brand image and actual brand perception.

These three parody pathways may provide customer insight.

1. Product or service dissatisfaction.

These parodies are at the basic product/service level. They are borne out of dissatisfaction with a product/service experience. They present an opportunity to detect a perceived gap between advertising and reality.



Using Parodies to Dissect Consumer Opinions (continued)

2. Embracing the David inside every Goliath. Is bigger always better?

Another common theme among parodies is portraying large, global companies as the “big bad wolf.” McDonald’s, Coca-Cola® and Microsoft have all been the subject of such spoofs. More importantly, it’s more about “perceived size” than “actual size.” We were surprised to find that only 3 of the world’s top 10 most recognized and valuable brands, made it to our top 10 spoofed list. Why are brands like IBM, Nokia, Disney or Mercedes not parodied as much?

The World’s 10 Most Valuable Brands³

Coca-Cola®
Microsoft
IBM
GE
Intel
Nokia
Disney
McDonald’s
Marlboro
Mercedes

Top 10 Spoofed Brands

Absolut
Apple
Budweiser
Calvin Klein
Got Milk?
Marlboro
MasterCard
McDonald’s
Microsoft
Nike

The lesson: Brand values do matter. If brand values are a reality and customers experience them in every interaction with your company, then you’re protecting yourself from the root causes of brand parody. Growing profits is as critical as growing brand values. In the years to come, profits and brand values will increasingly need to be built together.

It is possible to be big and still considered a good corporate citizen. Take Ben & Jerry’s for example. Though Ben & Jerry’s was bought by Unilever in 2000, they’ve still retained the brand’s core values. The company strongly publicizes its philanthropic efforts and the ice cream parlors, employees and website have a small-town, grass-roots feeling. So, even the news that they are opening 75 new parlors in Spain to expand their European presence has yet to spark consumer backlash.



3. Khermouch, Gerry. 2002. *The Best Global Brands*. Business Week.

Using Parodies to Dissect Consumer Opinions (continued)

3. Corporate responsibility: Talk the talk. Walk the walk.

Consumers expect that companies who tout a dedication to corporate responsibility actually employ business practices that reflect it.

The parodies that target corporate responsibility can get vicious, tangible and specific. More often than not, the angst expressed in this variety of spoofing centers around negative social and environmental effects of a specific company. More importantly, these spoofs originate from individuals and groups who feel very passionate about the subject. These spoofs are not intended to provide amusement—they are meant to publicize or expose alleged wrong doings. These consumers want to spread the word and the Internet has proven a viable tool for their efforts.

Looking at spoofs that focus on corporate responsibility is an excellent window into grass-roots opinions that may precede growing or emerging consumer awareness. It's an opportunity to evaluate the root of the concern and look at public affairs and cause-related marketing strategies.



Has taken good things from our lives.

Conclusion

Whether they are negative or positive, brand parodies offer companies invaluable consumer insight that is not forced out of a focus group, but home-grown and authentic. They offer us clues about what resonates with customers, what concerns them and possible early indicators of public opinion.

Our Brand Parody Tool Kit includes three different tools to help guide your discussion with your own marketing and branding team.

1. Our [spooof self-assessment](#) helps you to determine whether a spoof is positive, negative or neutral.
2. Our [brand parody action plan](#) offers possible steps to take after you've uncovered a parody.
3. [Five ways to respond](#) gives you a look at how you may respond and what other brands have done in the past.

With these tools, you don't have to wait to find a spoof of your brand in your inbox or email, you can be proactive. Find them. Analyze them. Decide your plan of action. Behind every laugh, there can be learning.

Brand Parody Tool Kit

The spoof self assessment

Use this test to determine if any of the parodies you have found may affect your brand equity. If you answer "C" to all of these questions, you may want to consider addressing the parodies head-on. Other combinations warrant discussion by your team to discern what insight the spoof may be providing and if it poses any danger at all to your brand.

The most dangerous parodies are brand specific, negative in nature and highly organized.

	A	B	C
Target Who does the parody poke fun at?	<input type="checkbox"/> No specific brand	<input type="checkbox"/> An industry or society in general	<input type="checkbox"/> A specific brand
Intent What is the intent of the parody?	<input type="checkbox"/> Laughter for the sake of laughter		<input type="checkbox"/> Malicious in nature with undertones of 'don't buy' or 'don't trust'
Breadth How organized and far-reaching is the parody?	<input type="checkbox"/> One-off, individual creation	<input type="checkbox"/> Has high pass-along value	<input type="checkbox"/> Part of a series. Part of an overall boycott movement. Specific websites set-up to house parodies.

Brand Parody Tool Kit (continued)

Brand parody action plan

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- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Perform a brand parody audit on the web. | a. Run a search engine test under your company name.
b. Run a search engine test using your company name followed by the word “parody” or “spoof.”
c. Utilize clipping services and Internet monitoring services to locate brand parodies or rogue content about your company. |
| <hr/> | |
| 2. Compare industry and societal parodies from those using your specific brand and evaluate if your brand is the target or your industry. | |
| <hr/> | |
| 3. Gauge the nature of the parody. | a. Is the parody harmless in nature or does it attack your corporate values?
b. Is the parody based on negative product or company perspective?
c. Does the parody involve logo or copyright infringement?
d. The nature of the parody will help you decide if a response is necessary, and if so, what kind of response. |
| <hr/> | |
| 4. Determine its breadth. | a. Are there a few stand-alone pieces or does it seem more organized?
b. Has there been significant viral activity that has raised awareness of the parody—positive or negative? |
| <hr/> | |
| 5. Uncover the source and reach of the parody. | a. Does the parody stem from employees or consumers? |
| <hr/> | |
| 6. Discuss response plan. | |
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Brand Parody Tool Kit (continued)

Five ways to respond

Ignore	Capitalize	Address Generally	Fight-back	Address Internally
Simply ignore parody	Recognize parody campaign and build off from its momentum	Make public statements in response to issues which are not legal or binding in nature	Litigate brand and logo copyright infringements	Use the parody as a means of consumer insight
	Anheuser-Busch saw an opportunity to leverage the power of the parody.	http://www2.coca-cola.com/contactus/myths_rumors/index.html	In June 2000 a 33-year-old San Francisco cartoonist was sued by Starbucks for copyright infringement. In this case, the parody was extremely negative defacing both their logo and attacking their corporate values.	Companies spend thousands of dollars and precious time figuring out what consumers think of their products. In the case of spoof marketing, consumers are going out of their way to give companies their perspective.
	In the summer of 2000, the Company placed an unreleased-to-television "Whassup" spot at a hidden location within budweiser.com. After a viral email campaign notified people of the spot, more than 16,000 people downloaded the spot.	<i>"Wondering about something you've seen or heard about our Company or our beverages? Get the straight story here about some of the myths and rumors that may concern you."</i>	In mid-1998, Kieron Dwyer created a parody of the famous Starbucks logo. Riffing on the ubiquitous coffee chain's longhaired mermaid, Dwyer stuck a coffee cup in the creature's hand, a cell phone in the other, and gave Ms. Starbucks prominent nipples and a navel ring. Instead of the familiar "Starbucks Coffee," the outer circle now said "Consumer Whore" – with dollar signs instead of stars.	So, while not all spoofs need to be addressed externally, the proliferation of spoof marketing provides an untapped avenue for companies to gauge consumer attitude – and all at no cost to the company itself.

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www.macboy.com
www.medialit.org
www.museumofhoaxes.com
www.parody.organique.com
pbskids.org/dontbuyit/
www.renraku.com
www.stevewilson.com
www.subvertise.org
www.wackypackages.com
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