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PRIDE MONTH GUIDE FOR BRANDS— NAVIGATING LGBTQ+ MARKETING AMID THE CULTURE WARS

TARGET, THE NORTH FACE AND THE DODGERS HAVE RECEIVED BACKLASH IN RECENT DAYS

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Brands face a turbulent environment as they promote Pride month-related messaging this June.



Target is facing boycotts from conservatives and LGBTQ+ supporters. Credit: Bloomberg

In recent years, June has been a time for brands to showcase their inclusivity and try to be seen as modern and progressive in support of Pride Month and the LGBTQ+ community. That is not the case this year, at least for now. Amid a frenzy of anti-LGBTQ+ activity from a growing faction of alt-right conservatives, many brands are staying silent. It's a stark contrast from last year, when Miller Lite released a book on the history

of queer bars, as part of its “Open and Proud” platform, Gymshark created a video series of LGBTQ+ people finding inclusivity in fitness, and Mastercard hosted a “Pride Plaza” in the metaverse.

Neither Molson Coors, which owns Miller Lite, nor Mastercard responded to an inquiry about Pride Month marketing this year; a representative for Gymshark said in late May that the fitness brand had nothing planned. Other brands that are planning Pride Month activations, such as Ulta Beauty, Chapstick, Absolut and Calvin Klein, said executives were unavailable to speak on the topic. The caution is at odds with what experts have seen in previous years—and is an early indicator that brands will stay quieter on Pride activations.

“In the past, when Pride Month would come up, sometimes we saw brands hesitating because they were fearful their allyship would seem shallow and that they weren’t doing enough. Now, we’re hearing concerns even from brands that have activated successfully in the past that now they might find themselves in the middle of a culture war,” said Lisa Weser, a former head of marketing communications and brand PR for Anheuser-Busch InBev who is currently CEO of Trailblaze, an agency for consumer packaged goods and cannabis brands.

Opinion: How brands can respond to assault on LGBTQ+ rights



The North Face is moving forward with its Pride collection despite backlash. Credit: North Face

In the last week alone, conservatives have called for boycotts of the Los Angeles Dodgers, Target and The North Face for their Pride Month activities. The “anti-woke” voices appear emboldened by their criticism of Bud Light’s partnership with transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney, which has sent the beer’s sales falling since

early April. Target responded to social media criticism of its Pride apparel by pulling some of the merchandise from the sales floor, citing employee safety—only to be criticized by pro-LGBTQ+ groups and politicians who accused the retailer of caving.

The headline-generating incidents have sown fear across marketing departments nationwide, with executives worried that any support or removal of that support could risk alienating all groups of Americans. Target lost \$10 billion of its value between May 17 and May 30, coinciding with the boycotts. The chain also received bomb threats from someone calling Target executives cowards “who turned their back on the LGBT community;” however, police determined there was no credible threat.

In short, the stakes have never been higher for so-called purpose marketing.

“For brands that were already activating around Pride year over year, we’re encouraging them to continue supporting those communities and not pull away,” Weser said. “But also, to do so only if they are fully prepared to stand behind those choices if and when they are attacked.” She added that if a brand does waffle on its stance, that could be seen as encouragement from boycotters.

Related: Is Pride marketing still relevant? Experts weigh in

As opposed to Target and Bud Light, The North Face opted to stand by its LGBTQ+ marketing, which included a Pride month collection and a video featuring drag queen Pattie Gonia. When The North Face came under attack the brand responded that “we stand with those who support our vision for a more inclusive outdoor industry.” After the Los Angeles Dodgers rescinded a Pride Night invitation to Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a nonprofit that promotes sexual tolerance, the MLB team faced backlash, including from members of the organization, and later reissued the invite.

“For a brand like The North Face, their values have been on their sleeve for a long time—that’s a brave and bold move that other brands can follow only if they’re able to stand ground in the same way and have put in the same amount of equity in the bank with those communities over the years,” Weser said.

Bud Light's backlash included criticism from LGBTQ+ advocates who have called out the brand for failing to defend transgender rights in the face of pressure from conservatives. The Human Rights Campaign earlier this month suspended Anheuser-Busch InBev's perfect score on its Corporate Equality Index, a tool that scores companies on their policies for LGBTQ+ employees. But on Tuesday the brand found support from the National LGBT Chamber of Commerce, which praised a \$200,000 contribution from AB InBev for the organization's Communities of Color Initiative.

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A 'toxic focal point'

The brand moves come as a conservative campaign against transgender rights continues to pick up momentum in mainstream America and galvanize the Republican base. So far in 2023, 491 anti-LGBTQ bills have been introduced in the U.S., according to the American Civil Liberties Union.

With so much of the focus—and legislation—aimed at transgender rights, some experts predict brands will avoid the issue in favor of more general support of gays and lesbians.

“This particular attack [against Bud Light] was specific to those in the trans community and that has been a particularly toxic focal point of certain elements of the far right of late,” said Kelly O’Keefe, a founding partner at consultancy Brand Federation. “What you will also see from some brands is that they will continue to share imagery that celebrates the gay community and Pride Month, but they will avoid the trans community.”

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At issue this year more than ever is the amplification of anti-LGBTQ+ voices on social media, allowing for videos like a man destroying Pride merchandise at Target to go viral, for example. And in April, Twitter removed a policy against the “targeted misgendering or deadnaming of transgender individuals.”

Katherine Sender, a professor in the department of communication and the feminist, gender, and sexuality studies program at Cornell University, noted that Anheuser-Busch has been advertising in gay print magazines since the 1990s. Yet now, with social platforms, brands can no longer remain under the radar with LGBTQ+ content.

“The difference now is there used to be the belief that if you were advertising in the gay press, mainstream consumers wouldn’t know or notice,” Sender said. “But the landscape with social media has changed so much that the division between niche gay press and influencer culture is much more porous.”

Most consumers remain divided on whether brands should address LGBTQ+ rights in their marketing. A recent Ad Age-Harris Poll found that 42% of Americans do not think companies should publicly take a stand on such rights, whether in support or opposition; 28% said companies should consider internal policy changes on the issue rather than publicity efforts. Nearly half, or 49%, of Americans said they at least somewhat agree that they like brands to feature members of the LGBTQ+ community in their messaging, though 58% of consumers said they would be neither more or less likely to buy from a brand that publicly promotes Pride Month.

Also read: How brands celebrated Pride Month in 2022



Crystal Head Vodka incorporated more elements showcasing LGBTQ+ allyship in its Pride bottle this year. Credit: Crystal Head Vodka

Generational divide

However, the difference in opinion is starker by generation. Of consumers between the ages of 18 and 34, which includes Gen Z and some millennials, 34% said they would be more likely to buy from a company that supports LGBTQ+ rights during Pride Month; this compares with just 13% of consumers ages 55 and over. The division is expected to continue as younger consumers grow and assert their buying power.

“Part of what we’re seeing is this huge generation split,” said Sender. “The old guard that wants everybody in their little boxes of gender and sexuality—that regime is dying.”

Historically, fighting for acceptance during Pride Month is nothing new and goes back to the root of the month’s existence. Pride Month originated with the Stonewall Riots in Greenwich Village in 1969, in which gay community members resisted police brutality with protests. The first Pride March took place in 1970. Experts say marketing Pride, particularly during June, means companies should be ready to fight in the face of backlash and be an ally to the LGBTQ+ community—otherwise, they should put away the rainbows.

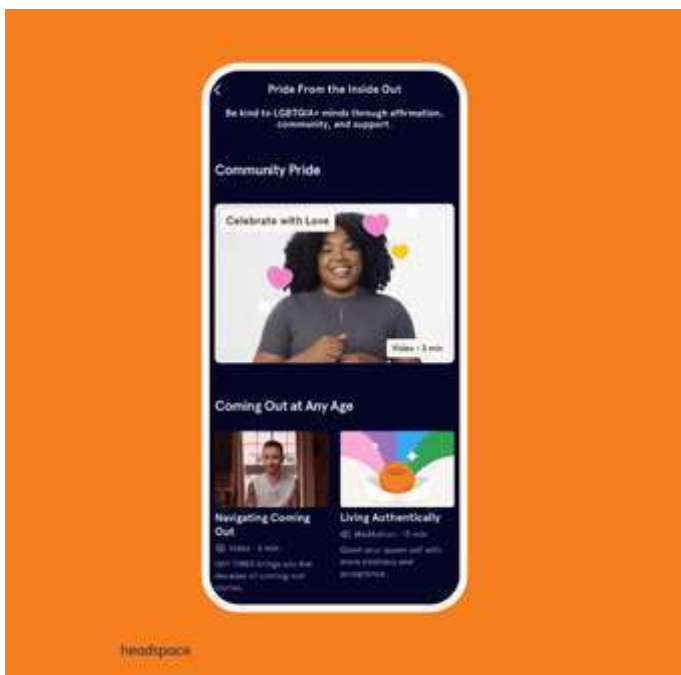
Opinion: Making rainbow washing a thing of the past

“Pride is, by definition, a protest,” said Eric Cervini, a Pulitzer Prize finalist and LGBTQ+ historian who authored the “Beers and Queer History” book in partnership with Miller Lite that was released last year. He noted that pride has been synonymous with resistance. “If you are running a marketing campaign for your company involving the

rainbow flag, that is declaring that you will protect the LGBTQ+ community—that you want to fight not just against bigotry but all forms of oppression that affect the LGBTQ+ community, whether police brutality, homelessness, or the mental health crisis in this country.”

However, the current environment is such that experts agree any brand putting out Pride-related marketing this year should have a prepared response in case of hostile responses. Marketers should plan for different scenarios and have communications and messaging ready for social media, for customer emailing and for the press. Such statements should be pre-approved by the highest levels of executives at the company so that everyone is on the same page early on, according to Weser. She added that companies should also make sure they have communicated their stance to their own employees. Such staffers should understand why a company is taking the action it is taking and should even be armed with talking points, Weser said.

“Ultimately for an employee to feel safe, they need to feel like their company has their back,” she said. “You’re never going to have 100% of agreement but clear communication about what you stand for and how you’re activating and what they can say and what you are doing to keep them safe—that’s really important to be proactive about.”



Headspace will have a robust offering of content for Pride Month. Credit: Headspace

Brands promoting LGBTQ+ allyship

Not all brands are staying quiet or pulling back on Pride marketing. Headspace, the meditation app, typically offers a robust selection of LGBTQ+ content. That includes offerings for asexual and intersex individuals that is always available but highlighted during June, according to Chief Content Officer Morgan Selzer, who noted that one-fifth of the brand's members identify as LGBTQ+ and have asked for more of such content. Offerings include content around coming out and raising queer youth and a Q&A podcast episode. The offerings will be available through Spotify and Apple Podcasts, and promoted via social media and Headspace's email newsletters.

“We want to make sure we have content and opportunities and give folks a sense of belonging inside of our product,” said Selzer, adding that she's not overly concerned about any potential criticism this year. “We've been in this space so long that we never received that type of backlash. Mostly it's people coming to us because of heightened anxiety.”

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For Crystal Head Vodka, the alcohol brand co-founded in 2008 by actor Dan Aykroyd, now is the time to further its commitment to the LGBTQ+ community. The brand introduced a special rainbow-hued Pride bottle three years ago, and this year's new iteration, which will be released on June 1, incorporates the trans flag for transgender as well as black and brown shades to represent more people of color, according to David Sikora, U.S. brand ambassador. Crystal Head works with local LGBTQ+ foundations in smaller towns across the company to ensure the proceeds are going directly to LGBTQ+ individuals. If the brand receives pushback from anti-LGBTQ+ voices, Sikora said it will not renege on its commitments; he added that one of the brand values of Crystal Head is inclusivity.

“The brand tagline is ‘Vodka for the creative spirt,’ and people who are creative include LGBTQ people—the ‘T’ and the ‘Q’ and not just the ‘L’ and the ‘G,’” he said. “We just feel it's very important to support the creative class and people in the LGBTQ community certainly fit into that creative class and the bottle is a nod in that direction.”

Inline Play

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