

# Brand fallibility in the digital age

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Marketers need to work with brands with a feeling that ; “to err is ok, to forgive is difficult”, when they practice consumer orientation. By [S Ramesh Kumar](#)

\*Maggi, the instant noodle brand, had got into complex problems, after the bad word of mouth .

\*Pantanjali (herbal cosmetics and food) in recent times and the iconic cola brands in the past have also been at the receiving end, due to bad word of mouth.

\*Celebrities, used by brands, get into negative word of mouth.

The reasons for the bad word of mouth may range from controversial associations to product problems.

In this [digital age](#), bad word of mouth can ruin the credibility of a brand, carefully, created and nurtured over decades. It is important for brands to be prepared to deal with brand fallibility; *like human beings, brands are not beyond reproach*. Such a crisis affects the knowledge structure of the brand existing in the minds of consumers.

Episodes, of [brand transgression](#) are not restricted to just Indian brands; several international brands like J&J, [Samsung](#), Toyota, [Nike](#) and Tylenol (analgesic) have faced such problems. This article is not about, how such brands had bounced back but about how a brand can address such problems, learning from history of brand transgressions.

## **Brand trust**

Marketers painstakingly cultivate brand associations, brand personality (adding human characteristics to brands) and consumer -brand relationships over a time. Consumers experience the brand not only in terms of its attributes and benefits but also in terms of its relationship. Such relationships are like human relationships. The more frequent the brand usage, the more intense is the relationship (provided such a relationship is based on commitment to the brand). Just as we are sometimes guilty transgressions in our relationships with others, brands may also commit mistakes. This is referred to as Brand Transgression by renowned researchers (Aaker and Fournier among some researchers). The transgression is the violation of consumer-brand relationships, either implicit or explicit.

### **Brand transgression and brand trust**

Several brands are built on trust. Trust involves both beliefs about the attributes and benefits of the brand and more importantly, the emotions associated with the brand.

Cadbury, the chocolate brand is a household brand in India and several generations had consumed it , both because of its taste ,cleanliness and a good feeling . When a few years back, the brand was affected by bad publicity when the brand was associated with product problems affecting its positive and pleasant emotions. Amitabh the celebrity, who is perceived as authentic (and has starred in perhaps the record number of ads across categories, over the last quarter century), had to reassure and restore the image of the brand from the damage caused by the transgression of the brand in the eyes of the consumers. The trust associated with the brand and the celebrity had stood the brand in good stead, during times of brand transgression.

### **Consequences of brand transgressions**

Sternberg 's work in psychology, suggests that for attachment to develop in an interpersonal relationship, commitment, intimacy and passion are prerequisites. If this is applied to brand consumer- relationships and brand transgression, emotions associated with the brand will be impacted and the emotion is likely to be an outcome of these three qualities. The trust associated with the brand in the past is very useful when the transgression occurs. In the year 2016 , Samsung had recalled Note 7 phones as the users had experienced the phones sparking off fire ; the recall was worth billions of dollars . The brand's past goodwill ensured that the next model Note 8 was a hit among consumers.

### **Dealing with brand crisis**

There are several ways in which brands can respond to a crisis.

#### 1) Acceptance

Consumers are humans and they respond to brand transgressions in different ways; some are more prone to forgive the offender and forgiveness results in better relationships between the offender and the aggrieved; more importantly, brands that apologize are more likely to be forgiven (as gathered from research reported in Psychology Today and other [marketing](#) journals). Tylenol the world renowned analgesic brand had I recalled 31 billion capsules of the brand, accepting its mistake, and shelling out \$100 million. The brand 's cyanide induced tablets had caused deaths.

2) Is the transgression self -image related, product -related?

Research literature has differentiated between various kinds of brand offenses. It is to be, however, noted that the cultural context is important and the brand 's response needs to be appropriate to the respective culture. The Cadbury's example deals with the performance related offence and given the Indian culture of strong passion towards the celebrity the brand had aptly used the right celebrity with strong credibility among the masses.

Self -image related transgression is closely related to the cultural context and may not be explicit like overt brand transgression. Fairness creams in India has a huge market and the market for the category during the year 2020 was around Rs 10.000 crores. Sociologists note that there is a kind of value paradox that may be associated with many cultures, across the world. In simple terms, the value paradox is associated with a contradictory cultural mindset. At a social level, the people in the culture detest certain practices /beliefs/values but at an individual level exhibit preference for the same practice/belief /value. Fairness of the skin is one such aspect category. While we as a culture are sensitive to color- based discrimination, fairness creams, talcum powders and whiteness care at parlors find raging demand. A brand needs to be sensitive to changing environments. Fair & Lovely brand was renamed as Glow & Lovely, when the brand was under criticism, especially after the global publicity received by "Black Lives Matter" movement that happened in the US, after a deplorable incident, involving a black (discussion, on the change of brand name is not within the purview of the article).

Speed with which a brand responds too reflects the sincerity of the brand. Toyota had recalled millions of its vehicles after the car's unintended acceleration was linked to fatal accidents but was fined for its late decision to recall.

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*-The author is professor of marketing at IIM, Bangalore. Views expressed are personal.*