

Crisis Analysis - PESO - Bumble Backlash

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Introduction

In April 2024, Bumble, an online dating app, launched a campaign to promote its “Opening Moves” feature, which allowed women the “option to set a question that their matches can respond to” ([Bumble, 2024](#)). While the feature wasn’t the problem, it was how it was promoted that raised questions and backlash. It was advertised with provocative billboard slogans such as “You know full well a vow of celibacy is not the answer” or “Thou shalt not give up on dating and become a nun” ([Gazdik, 2024](#)). Critics started to argue that it demeaned personal choices around celibacy and marginalized women and asexual communities ([Owen, 2024](#)). In response, Bumble issued an apology acknowledging the mistake, removed the ads, donated to the National Domestic Violence Hotline, and offered the billboard space to advocacy groups ([Bradley, 2024](#)).

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1. Paid:

Bumble launched a global paid-advertising campaign for its “Opening Moves” feature and accompanying rebrand, using large out-of-home (OOH) billboards in major cities, featuring provocative slogans such as “You know full well a vow of celibacy is not the answer” and “Thou shalt not give up on dating and become a nun.” They wanted to solve the problem of user exhaustion by initiating conversations.

- <https://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/396005/>
- <https://www.thedrum.com/opinion/women-were-having-nun-bumble-s-celibacy-ad-n-or-were-strategists>

Analysis:

Based on the Ecological Approach, organizations work best as open systems that actively monitor their environments and adapt to change (Broom & Sha, 2021). In this case, Bumble launched a bold paid campaign without really testing how stakeholders might respond beforehand. That makes it seem like they were operating more as a closed or reactive system,

rather than being proactive and responsive to their environment. Organizations should spot potential issues early and address them before they grow into bigger problems. In Bumble's situation, the paid campaign itself ended up becoming the issue, rather than preventing one from happening (Page & Parnell, 2017). The campaign definitely succeeded in getting people's attention. It created a lot of buzz and visibility for the brand very quickly, which can be valuable when a company is trying to reposition itself or promote a new feature.

Missed Opportunity:

- They should have pre-tested campaign messaging key stakeholder groups, like celibate individuals, the asexual community, or women who choose to abstain. Instead, they focused mainly on broad demographic appeal, which overlooked how certain audiences might interpret the message differently.
- Bumble should conduct focus groups to understand how different groups might respond. Tracking trends and social change is essential for anticipating reactions and adapting messaging (Broom & Sha, 2021). Doing this kind of testing early on would help predict potential negative feedback and allow the company to change its approach before going public.

2. Earned:

Major outlets like CBS News and LGBTQ Nation both covered the controversy and Bumble's response. The company's press release and public statements were widely shared and cited by these outlets, which actually expanded the story's reach. While the attention wasn't entirely positive, it did generate significant earned media coverage around the campaign and Bumble's handling of the situation.

- <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/bumble-dating-app-removes-anti-celibacy-ads/>
- <https://www.lgbtqnation.com/2024/05/bumble-dating-app-in-freefall-after-anti-celibacy-campaign-offends-asexuals-and-others/>

- <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/14/style/bumble-celibacy-ad-apology.html>

The Wall Street Journal did an interview with Bumble's CEO Lidiane Jones and founder Whitney Wolfe who addressed the issue and the backlash and discussed the lessons they learned which provided a transparency for the customers.

- <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8DVR7Lr/>

Analysis:

Effective crisis communication requires transparency, timeliness, and two-way engagement with stakeholders (Page & Parnell, 2017). Although Bumble did release a public apology, it came only after the backlash had already gained momentum. This shows that their response was more reactive than proactive. Bumble also issued a one-sided statement instead of fostering conversation or understanding. The public apology and removal of the campaign were covered widely which is better than ignoring or delaying the situation. The fact that they publicly acknowledged the mistake gave them some credibility in owning up to the mistake.

Missed Opportunity:

- Bumble could have launched an outreach before or right as the ads went live to frame the campaign's purpose and clarify any misinterpretation.
- Bumble should have created a media relations plan with key spokespersons and pre-approved talking points that anticipate and prepare for any backlash scenarios (Page & Parnell, 2017). That way, if coverage turns negative, the organization would be ready to engage rather than simply respond.

3. Shared:

Social media users rapidly shared their criticism of the billboard campaign on platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Twitter with hashtags and commentary focusing on how the ad

demeaned celibate and asexual communities. Even after putting out apology statements, users continued to spread their criticism over the company.

- <https://news.designrush.com/bumble-takes-down-vow-of-celibacy-ooh-ads-after-backlash?>
- <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8DVe18E/>
- <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZP8D4crCX/>

Bumble’s own social-media accounts (Instagram/TikTok) published apology posts stating, “We made a mistake. Our ads referencing celibacy ... instead of bringing joy and humor, we unintentionally did the opposite.” The Wall Street Journal had posted an interview video on

- <https://www.prweek.com/article/1872663/bumble-offers-domestic-violence-groups-billboard-space-pulling-celibacy-ads?>

As part of the response, Bumble offered to repurpose its billboard ad space by “offering the ad space to advocacy groups” and making a donation to the National Domestic Violence Hotline.

Analysis:

Social media can be used as an essential early-warning system for emerging crises (Page & Parnell, 2017). In Bumble’s case, backlash spread quickly across shared media, showing that negative sentiment developed almost immediately after the campaign launch. The brand could have applied an open-system approach by using social listening and monitoring tools to identify early signs of risk and adjust the campaign/apology in real time (Broom & Sha, 2021). The company’s decision to donate and re-allocate ad space reinforced transparency and showed that it was taking the right steps.

Missed Opportunity:

- Bumble could have worked with influencers or community groups to start a conversation while the campaign was running, instead of waiting until after people reacted negatively.

4. Owned:

On its official social media channels, Bumble posted statements describing the situation, offering the billboard space to nonprofit groups, and announcing donations to groups supporting women, marginalised communities and abuse survivors. They removed or ceased the billboard campaign and stated they would reconsider their creative strategy. I found below a linkedin post from over a year ago. While statements were made on Instagram as well, the posts have been since taken down after Bumble rebranded and started a clean slate.

- https://www.linkedin.com/posts/bumbleinc_to-our-beloved-bumble-community-we-made-activity-7195931689917825025-mZgT/

Analysis:

Owned media gives organizations full control over their message and is a key part of an open-system approach (Broom & Sha, 2021). Bumble used its owned channels to announce the removal of the campaign and the re-allocation of the billboards to advertise and promote a much bigger issue. Bumble's decision to donate and repurpose ad space shows that are learning what to do post-crisis and showing an authentic recovery (Page & Parnell, 2017). However, after rebranding, Bumble deleted many of its Instagram posts, including its apology statement. Now, it's harder for users to see the brand's full response or follow-up, which weakens long-term credibility.

Missed Opportunity:

- They could have used owned media before the campaign launch to explain the rationale behind the rebrand and the messaging so they could narrate the story in their perspective.
- They should have a press room with all their press releases and statements. Their newsroom consisted of only financial quarter statements. This shows transparency and accountability.

References

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