

Brands, here's why you should care about 'woke Twitter'

By  Sarah Britten

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Woke Twitter could bring down your campaign and cause severe reputational damage. Here's why this audience should be considered as an essential part of the strategic and creative process.

The other day I saw a Corsa Lite in traffic and had a flashback to the award-winning [Raj and Raj campaign](#) that flighted in the mid-2000s. I don't think it would last a week in 2016 - a campaign based on two white guys ripping off Indian accents? It wouldn't survive the social media outrage.



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These days, I assess every campaign and social media post that passes my desk through the eyes of woke Twitter. Here's why brand custodians - on both the brand and agency side - should be doing the same.

“ S/O to woke twitter! this has been an enlightening week, I've learnt so much.- CurateZAR | Avela (@CurateZAR)

[January 25, 2016](#) ”

Um... so what's woke Twitter?

Most clients are surprised when I mention "woke Twitter" in presentations, so I'm assuming that a lot of readers won't be familiar with the term either. "Woke Twitter" is not a formal term. It can and has been used as a pejorative, and there are a lot of people who don't like it, but it's become widely used over the past six months. Adapted from the expression "Stay woke" associated with the [#BlackLivesMatter](#) movement, woke Twitter refers to socially aware, activist Twitter. Woke Twitter is avowedly leftist and feminist, and when they see something they don't like, they are very vocal.

How do you know you've found woke Twitter?

The best way to find woke Twitter is to look for keywords. White privilege, cishet (short for cisgender heterosexual), [#feesmustfall](#), patriarchy, appropriation and structural racism are a good start. (If you put out a piece of communication that can be interpreted as racist, sexist, homophobic or transphobic, woke Twitter *will* find you and you will soon be trending for all the wrong reasons.)

Why pay attention to woke Twitter?

Woke Twitter brought down Bic in 2015 for their [Women's Day post](#) and played a role in driving awareness of the [Appletiser social media disaster](#). Conversations around #feesmustfall, racism, homophobia, transphobia and social justice are driven by woke Twitter, and this includes brand activities of all kinds. Whether it's Marie Claire advertising an [unpaid internship](#), a Woolworths branch featuring a half-complete Christmas display [reminiscent of slave trains](#), or an Eskel Jawitz listing featuring an old South African flag on display in the lounge, brand reputations are on the line, online, every single day.

But, you might say, this is not our target audience, so why does it matter?

There are no Chinese walls between target audiences and channels. Twitter is now a prime source of content for mainstream news organisations, which means that any trending topic is likely to be given even greater coverage. What happens on Twitter definitely doesn't stay on Twitter (or Facebook, for that matter, as Penny Sparrow knows only too well).

How do I assess creative work through the eyes of woke Twitter?

It helps to be familiar with the types of conversations happening online and the type of messages - deliberate or accidental - that are likely to push the wrong buttons. If you're not, find someone who is. Pay attention to imagery, copy, and the interplay between the two. Could your ad be interpreted as victim-blaming? Are you being insensitive to racial nuances? (Appletiser, for example, made the mistake of referring to a black woman as a "brunette".) If you're not sure, don't put work out into the public domain, even if it's just a Facebook post.

Should I censor creative work now?

It's important to understand that woke Twitter doesn't have to like what you're putting out - this is an audience that is skeptical of brand communication and dislikes most advertising on principle. Woke Twitter is never going to like ads that promote conventional gender roles, for example. It's when there's potential for outrage that brands have a problem. Avoid anything that can be construed as racism, sexism, homophobia or victim-blaming. Cultural appropriation is becoming more of an issue too; Woolworths recently removed a pink feather headdress on a mannequin after being called out.

What does this mean for "brave" work?

Creativity has never been about being safe. Challenging, even offensive work will always have a role - provided it is relevant. If anything, the increasing scrutiny of woke Twitter opens up the door to communication that challenges norms and creates opportunities for doing things truly differently. [Campbell's soup](#), for example, might have received flak from the Christian right for a 2015 ad featuring two gay dads, but earned praise for featuring a different kind of family. No more relying on clichés or stereotypes - you will be called out for them, as you should be. Brands that get this right are the brands that future-proof themselves. So don't be safe, be smart.

The increasingly influential role of social media outrage is inevitably going to impact on brands, from advertising, to in-store displays, to the personal accounts of employees. Rather than being caught on the back foot when a social media crisis

arises, brand custodians should understand the new and shifting dynamics of the world in which their communication is disseminated. It's not always possible to predict when something goes wrong - but it helps to know what you're getting into.

ABOUT SARAH BRITTEN

Dr Sarah Britten has 21 years of experience across various clients and multiple strategic disciplines, including social media and shopper. Her client experience includes Nedbank, Investec, FNB, Botho Group, Sanofi, Colgate Palmolive, Aspen, Adcock Ingram, Kraft Heinz, Citroën and Land Rover.

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