

The Moose in the Room: A Mercedes-Benz Case

TEACHING NOTE

The authors prepared this case solely as a basis for class discussion and not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management. Although based on real events and despite occasional references to actual companies, this case is fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons or entities is coincidental.

Teaching Plan

The teaching notes were written as a guide to the instructor presenting the Mercedes-Benz case 'The Moose in the Room'. This guide will provide suggestions for methods that will allow the instructor to teach the case in an effective and coherent manner. The content of the teaching notes includes a briefcase synopsis, an outline of the learning objectives presented through three relevant theory topics, an overview of the key learnings, an outline of the discussion questions, teaching suggestions, a proposed time plan of the case presentation and lastly a reflection.

Case Synopsis

In October 1997 Mercedes-Benz took a leap by introducing the A-Class model. With the intent to expand its product portfolio and reach new customers, Mercedes-Benz designed a car that combined the space of a minivan with the exterior dimensions of a compact car through unusual design. After 18 months of a vigorous advertising campaign that resulted in 100 000 pre-orders, the car was released and delivered to some of its customers. However, only three days after the release, the Swedish magazine 'Teknikens Värld' conducted a test of the car that will be later known as the 'Moose test'. To simulate evading an obstacle, part of the 'Moose test' included an abrupt turn at the speed of approximately 65 km per hour. The test failed, as the A-Class tipped over. The failure of the test was catastrophic for Mercedes-Benz, which has always stood for safety, quality and solidity. Initially, after the failed test, Mercedes-Benz reacted defensively and offered only to replace the tires, ruling out an interruption to the production of the A-Class. However, after a wave of criticism, Mercedes-Benz stopped the production of the car and issued an apology. Mercedes-Benz was still determined to restart the production of the A-Class, therefore in December 1997, they invited the four journalists that initially conducted the 'Moose test' to re-test the car. Following the success of the new 'Moose test' Mercedes-Benz began a vigorous advertising campaign in German news outlets to promote the success behind the latest 'Moose test' in the hopes that it would restore their image. The aim of the case is to investigate how Mercedes-Benz can utilise humour as a rhetoric technique in order to change how the customers perceive the incident and the brand personality.

Learning objectives

Brand Identity & Brand personality

The importance of the topic of brand identity has been widely recognised among academic researchers. As stated by Kapferer (2012), being one of the fundamental

elements of brand management, brand identity is what differentiates a brand from the competition as a 'coherent and unique' entity. The Brand Identity Matrix developed by Urde (2021), outlines nine building blocks divided into three categories – internal, external, and one category consisting of elements that are both internal and external. The matrix also provides a holistic picture of the three layers of corporate brand management – identity, communication and positioning, and reputation.

Brand personality, as one of the building blocks of the brand identity, has been defined by Aaker (1997) as the human characteristics that a brand assigns to itself. Developing a brand personality triggers consumers to more easily identify with the brand, allowing them to use the brand as an instrument for self-expression and, ultimately, build emotional and long-lasting relationships with the brand (Phau & Lau, 2000; Ramaseshan & Stein 2014). Furthermore, according to Ramaseshan & Stein (2014), we can distinguish three different types of self-expression: the 'actual' self, the 'ideal self' or the 'normative' self. Crafting a strong and distinguishable brand personality through intangible assets provides the brand with a competitive advantage by making it more difficult to copy and thus, earning a special position in the minds of the consumers. Aaker (1997) classifies brand personality into five dimensions: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness.

However, when it comes to Mercedes-Benz and the time of the moose incident, the notions of brand identity and brand personality were rather new, insufficiently researched and barely implemented by companies. Even though it is challenging to find empirical material to assist us in objectively determining the brand identity of Mercedes-Benz at the time, it is possible to make some assumptions regarding their personality and brand perception. Mercedes-Benz was then considered to be a very serious brand, associated mostly with senior executives, and generally, an older target group. Presumably, the brand personality would fall under the 'competence' (related to adjectives such as reliable, professional, successful) and perhaps to some extent 'sophistication' (related to prestige, upper-class, status, exclusive) personality archetypes described by Aaker (1997). After the moose incident, Mercedes-Benz started taking small steps in moving away from some of these perceptions and incorporating personality traits somewhat characteristic of the 'excitement' archetype (related to traits such as spirited, humorous, contemporary). This is evident in some of their communication in relation to the incident, such as selling moose soft toys at car dealerships and inviting famous journalists to test the modified vehicle to humour the media response. On that account, the decision of whether or not to use humour after the incident is linked to a deeper identity-related concern. It poses the question of whether they should diverge from their current brand personality representing the solid foundation they have built.

Reputation management & Crisis

The expectations of companies have become much greater than before. The invention of the internet and the constant media attention has made it impossible for companies to hide their malpractice. Academic scholars all over the world have come

to the conclusion that reputation is one of the most imperative aspects of a corporate brand's success that can provide a competitive advantage (Sohn & Larscy, 2014). A good reputation that has been accumulated over time has been proven to act as a buffer in times of reputational crisis. This phenomenon resulted in the formulation of fundamentally similar concepts such as 'reputational reservoir' (Greyser, 2009) and 'the halo effect' (Coombs & Holladay, 2006). According to Coombs and Holladay (2006), 'the halo effect' can serve as a protection to the reputation of the company in human error causes and provide a benefit of the doubt. Similarly, 'the reputational reservoir' as formulated by Greyser (2009) argues that a brand can be rescued in times of reputational crises by laying a strong and good foundation of reputation over time that is built on authenticity.

It is important to note that a reputational crisis can arise in many forms, from a number of various causes. Some crises are smaller than others. Carroll (2009) highlights the significance of distinguishing between a crisis and an incident, as the latter does not cause major issues for the brand. Geysler (2009) outlined nine different types of reputational crises: product failure, social responsibility gap, corporate misbehaviour, executive misbehaviour, spokesperson misbehaviour and controversy, death of a symbol of the company, loss of public support and controversial ownership. In the case of the Mercedes-Benz case study 'product failure' was the cause of the reputational crisis in 1997 when the A-Class tipped over during the 'Moose test'.

Nevertheless, a consistent difference between the internal identity and the external image can cause long-lasting reputational damage to a company (Fill & Roper, 2012). A reputational crisis like in this case study can be especially damaging when it affected what was described as 'the essence of the brand' which is a defining characteristic of a brand that is most closely associated with its identity (Greyser, 2009). In the case of Mercedes-Benz, a brand that has always laid emphasis on its unmatched and undeniable quality and innovativeness has now harboured suspicion and distrust from the media and the general public.

After the damage has been done, companies react differently depending on the severity of the issue. However, the main goal is to change the perceptions of the stakeholders in favour of the company (Eccles, Newquist & Schatz, 2007). Whilst some argue that publicly accepting responsibility can be a costly route that should be avoided (Coombs, 2004b; Tyler, 1997), there is greater support for the notion that a substantial apology and the admission of full responsibility will greater benefit the reputation of the company (Schlenker et al., 2001; Carroll, 2009; Greyser, 2009). Despite the negativity associated with reputational crises, previous research argues that they provide an opportunity for companies to learn and improve their operational processes, which will work as a 'vaccine' that will protect the company in the future (Carroll, 2009). Something that Mercedes-Benz achieved by transforming their failure into a teachable moment which is advertised in their brand strategy up until this day.

Corporate communication

Corporate communication is a dynamic process that can help the organisation gain a competitive advantage and nurture a brand's reputation by establishing sustainable long-term relationships with stakeholders, influencing stakeholders' opinions and the ways in which they perceive the organisation (Fill & Roper, 2019). It is a holistic and interdisciplinary function that encompasses both internal and external communication fields of expertise such as general management, human resources, psychology, branding, and public and media relations (Fill & Roper, 2019; Ndela, 2019). Tasks related to corporate communications can include either external tasks such as informing, explaining and defending the company's position or internal such as reinforcing and affirming the brand core to the employees (Fill & Roper, 2019).

Corporate communication responses during a time of crisis are an integral part of the reputation management of any organisation (Carroll, 2009; Fill & Roper, 2012; Ndlela, 2019). Crisis communication is a possibility for the company to respond, and attempt to control (at least to some extent) the damage inflicted by the crisis at hand as well as to sustain the trust of its internal and external stakeholders (Ndlela, 2019). According to Carroll (2009), a proactive communication policy taking into consideration legal advice is a necessity, in order for the brand to avoid forming an information vacuum. Corporate communication in the context of crisis management is a complex and dynamic process rather than a linear one. It involves means of communication with various stakeholders to either ensure their involvement and action or simply win their commitment, support and understanding when it comes to the decisions taken by the firm (Frandsen & Johansen, 2016).

A brand should represent an ethos that sets it apart from other brands. With reference to Roper and Fill (2012), ethos, together with pathos and logos, form the core identity of a brand. This is carried and communicated to the outside world by means of storytelling. Logos arguments focus on facts while ethos arguments put emphasis on the character and personality of the company. Finally, pathos arguments address the feelings and arguments of the company. It is crucial that the rhetoric used by a company matches the personality of the company. Ethos can be positively or negatively influenced by factors such as the text of an advertisement and the general style (Grancea, 2019).

In the case of Mercedes-Benz and the 'Moose test', it is important to understand that the change of brand identity already shown in the building block 'Brand Identity & Brand Personality' in the context of the introduction of the A-Class and subsequent marketing campaigns was necessary for the change of rhetoric. Only the extension of the brand identity to a younger brand enabled Mercedes-Benz to use more humour in advertising campaigns. Furthermore, regarding corporate communication, it is highly advisable for the firm to consider the four central criteria for effective corporate communication - form, style, timing and tone of corporate communication after the incident, especially when it comes to incorporating humour as a rhetoric technique. Finally, it is also important for Mercedes-Benz to determine the risks of using humour.

The use of Humour in crisis management

When thinking of crisis management, humour may not be the first strategy that comes to mind. Nevertheless, a well-timed joke can be a powerful tool to overcome crises and difficult times. One of the main benefits of using humour in crisis management is its ability to reduce tension and thus provide relief. Crises can upset and frighten people. Through humour, a company can create a moment of levity that relieves some of the stress and anxiety people feel (Simpson, 2003). Furthermore, Lynch (2002) believes that humour can be used as a means of reducing tension and affirming one's superiority. By allowing customers to laugh at them, a company controls its customers' laughter and thus exercises a certain power.

Furthermore, humour can be used to show that a brand is relatable and human. It is easy for the public to see a company going through a crisis as a faceless entity that is only interested in profit. Through humour, the company can give itself a more human touch (Vigsø, 2013). This can rebuild (lost) trust and create a sense of empathy between the company and its customer and the public.

Besides relieving tension and showing the company's comprehensibility, humour can also be used to differentiate a company from its competitors (Vigsø, 2013; Lynch, 2002). In crisis situations, brands use similar tactics to manage the situation. However, a company that uses humour to overcome a crisis can stand out and be better remembered. This can lead to a company maintaining or even improving its reputation despite the crisis.

Nevertheless, humour in crisis management must be used in a targeted way. Not all crises are suitable for humour and it is crucial to pay attention to the severity of the situation and to react sensitively. Humour that is inappropriate or taken as offensive can cause damage and turn a brand's clientele against it. Especially when the company is dealing with a crisis where people have been hurt or killed, the use of humour is not recommended due to a lack of empathy (Vigsø, 2013).

In the case of Mercedes-Benz, no serious harm to people occurred as a result of the faulty design of the A-Class. Also, the number of customers personally affected shortly after the launch of the A-Class was comparatively small. Moreover, the A-Class was quickly technically revised by Mercedes-Benz and brought onto the market in an improved version (cf. Management Decision). The cars delivered so far were also quickly retrofitted. Immediately after the crisis, Mercedes-Benz decided against using humour and chose a campaign of apology. Nevertheless, the above points have made it possible for Mercedes-Benz to mention the 'Moose test' humorously over the past 25 years without losing its reputation. For example, some A-Classes were delivered by the car dealer with little moose soft toys for the 10th anniversary, the successful passing of the 'Moose test' was highlighted with a wink at product presentations or, as described in the management decision, a moose was placed in a commercial for the 25th anniversary of ESP.

But Mercedes-Benz did not only use humour in connection with the 'Moose test'. Humour was also used as a stylistic device in general, for example with the Chicken

Video, which demonstrates the comfort and stability of the chassis (cf. Management Decision). Nevertheless, Mercedes-Benz has also set limits for the use of humour. As an example, a project by the Filmakademie Baden-Württemberg from 2013 can be mentioned here. As part of a seminar project, students shot a fake commercial with very black humour in which a Mercedes-Benz drives over the young Adolf Hitler in order to prevent danger before it arises. Mercedes-Benz clearly displayed information in German and English on the video, showing that there is no connection between the commercial and the Mercedes-Benz company. Furthermore, Mercedes-Benz has distanced itself from the commercial by means of a statement in which the company criticises the death of a child and the use of National Socialist motifs for advertising purposes.

Referring to Speck (1991), there are different types of humour that are used in advertising campaigns. The first group is nonsense and comics. These are characterised by a low degree of arousal. The second group consists of ridicule and irony/sarcasm. Another example as part of irony/sarcasm is black humour. This group is generally more aggressive and more arousal than nonsense and comics. Companies can target another company, but also themselves. The last group is puns. This cannot be clearly separated from the other groups, as it combines elements from all groups. Mercedes-Benz mainly uses self-irony in the advertising campaigns considered. Both the release of moose soft toys and the appearance of a moose in a commercial for the 25th anniversary can be assigned to this category. The chicken commercial, on the other hand, can be assigned to the first category, nonsense. The fake commercial combines sarcasm in the form of black humour with the pun that the car recognises dangers before they arise.

Overview of Key Learning Objectives

Different key learning objectives for the audience are presented in **Table 1**. The first column shows, in hierarchical order, which cognitive skills are to be addressed and enhanced. A full description of each skill is provided in the second column. The third column is an illustration of the application of each skill in the context of the Mercedes-Benz case.

Table 1: Key Learning Objectives

Skill	Description	Application
<i>Remembering</i>	...using humour in the brand advertising strategy can be both effective/ damaging for a brand's reputation.	For Mercedes-Benz it was effective to use humour in crisis management but also for advertising campaigns.
<i>Understanding</i>	...that there is a right time and a place to incorporate humour in brand communication.	It took Mercedes-Benz many actions, time and gaining back trust before they managed to implement humour.
<i>Applying</i>	...our knowledge on the topics of corporate communication, brand identity, crisis management and humour in advertising.	How Mercedes-Benz applied these building blocks in the context of the failed 'Moose test' incident.
<i>Analysing</i>	...how humour can affect the brand identity.	Mercedes-Benz not only being perceived as a serious carmaker but someone that can leverage on and laugh at their mistakes.
<i>Evaluating</i>	...the severity of the incident is crucial to determine whether it is okay to use humour in the advertising strategy.	The use of humour was appropriate because the incident with the A-Class did not involve any serious damage.
<i>Creating</i>	...an opportunity out of the situation and shifting the brand personality.	Mercedes-Benz created an opportunity for the brand to shift from a serious brand personality to a more humorous one.

Discussion questions

Main question

You take the role of the executive board of Mercedes-Benz 10 years after the incident.

You want to introduce the follow-up model of the A-Class. An advertising agency came up with the idea of using humour and giving away moose soft toys at dealerships. Should we follow that advice and use humour in our campaign?

Assisting questions

Could humour be used in a different way?

In which situations it is not appropriate to use humour?

What are the risks of using humour after a crisis?

How could the decision 10 years ago to change the brand personality with the A-Class influence your decision today?

If Mercedes-Benz incorporates humour into their advertising strategy, whether it will and how will that change the brand personality and how the customers perceive the brand?

Optional Question

Imagine you are now on the board of Mercedes-Benz in 2022.

You are currently planning an advertising campaign to celebrate 25 year-anniversary of ESP. Would you mention the 'Moose test', and if so, in what way?

Teaching suggestions

This section serves as a guideline for case presentation and discussion facilitation. The main aim is to aid the development of a teaching method, which is in line with the learning objectives outlined in the previous section, and which will ultimately help reach these objectives by inspiring an engaging discussion. It describes the three stages of case presentation: introduction, case discussion and concluding phase.

Pre-presentation and Introduction Phase

During the pre-presentation phase, visual tools such as PowerPoint are prepared. All components needed for the preparation of the case including the written case, the management decision and the teaching notes are to be carefully studied beforehand. If the instructor would like to use the visuals for the case, these will also be available. It is advisable to prepare a technical details checklist before presenting to avoid any technical issues that might prevent the case from running smoothly. In case the

presentation is to be held in person, the instructor is to make sure the PowerPoint file is accessible, both on a laptop and on a USB drive as a backup. Additionally, before presenting, she/he needs to ensure the sound is connected so any video material is audible to all discussion participants. If the presentation is to be held online, the presenter performs a technical check to make sure both the microphone and video are functioning, and the internet connection is stable.

The preparation for the case includes having a clear overview of the tasks to be performed by the case instructor. These include presenting the case using the visual tools, asking the main questions for discussion, leading the discussion by asking the assisting questions when needed, summarising and sorting out the main points by writing them on the whiteboard, and concluding the discussion while keeping the time plan into consideration. In the case of more than one person presenting, a clear distribution of roles among the facilitators is required. It is recommended that one person leads the discussion, while the other uses the whiteboard to write comments.

During the introduction phase of the case, the presenter uses the PowerPoint visual to give an overview of the Mercedes-Benz Group as a company as well as explain the incident in detail. Consequently, the main discussion questions are asked in two rounds – followed by a discussion after each question is asked.

Case Discussion Phase

The most active part of the case is expected to take place in the case discussion phase. The discussion will be a roleplay version with the students represented as the board members of the Mercedes-Benz Group. This part of the case presentation is meant to encourage students to use their analytical and problem-solving skills to propose alternative strategies that answer the two main questions.

During this phase, the instructor should hold a neutral standpoint, yet continue to encourage discussion amongst the students. The instructor needs to be knowledgeable about Mercedes-Benz and have a solid understanding of the case. If the instructor feels like the discussion is not moving forward he is welcome to follow up responses with assisting questions that might stimulate the discussion. Because one main question was formulated to be discussed by the students. However, an optional question will be brought up in case the case discussion will not be moving forward as effectively.

If the case is presented by multiple instructors, one should be responsible for writing down suggestions and the main case questions on the whiteboard. Another instructor can be more active in developing and supporting the discussion. Furthermore, at the beginning of the discussion, the instructor should determine whether the students should raise their hands to speak and clarify that to the entire class. It is strongly recommended that the instructor makes sure to give all willing students the opportunity to express their opinion. The instructor needs to keep an eye on the time and keep the discussion within the allocated minutes. When the time comes to make a vote, the students can be instructed to show their stance by a show of their hands.

Concluding phase

When the time allotted for discussion is over, the instructors present the management decision. At this point, it is explained to what extent Mercedes-Benz used humour to cope with the moose crisis, but also beyond that in advertising campaigns. The presentation format is the same as for the introduction, including the same preparation for a smooth implementation.

After the presentation of the management decision, the audience is given time for questions and asked for their opinion on the solution. A second, short discussion could be held here if the audience has decided not to use humour. To summarise the case and conclude the discussion, the instructors write the key takeaways on the whiteboard together with the audience. In order to conclude the discussion and provide a summary of the case, it is recommended that the instructor and participants collaborate to list the main takeaways on a whiteboard. Additionally, it is appropriate for the instructor to express gratitude to the audience for their participation and time as a way to end the presentation.

Time Plan

This section will go over the timeline of the case. The timeline in **Figure 1** below will work as a guiding tool to make sure that the instructor includes all relevant parts of the case study in the presentation. The total timeframe for the case presentation is 45 minutes. The introduction of Mercedes-Benz and the case questions should take about 15 min. This part will include the background information of Mercedes-Benz, the incident and the introduction of the case questions. The remaining 30 minutes should be focused on the actual case discussion which includes the discussion of the questions and the management decisions.

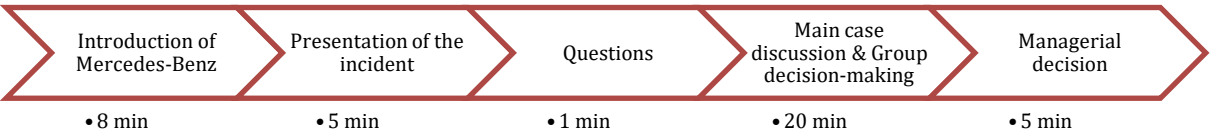


Figure 1: Time Plan

Reflection

Case writing represented a new and exciting challenge for us as a team. We found it to be a unique opportunity to apply academic concepts and theories from the corporate brand management course and directly apply them to a real-life case, challenging us to think from different perspectives we normally do not explore in

academia. It required not only a deep dive into the research topic but also lateral thinking, strategic and analytical reasoning, as well as balancing and managing team dynamics.

The process of case selection began with a brainstorming session, in which we wrote all our ideas and discussed which of the cases have the potential for inspiring an engaging discussion and which can contribute to the learning of the class. After settling on three choices, we each researched a case topic and developed a one-pager. The supervision session with Mats Urde provided us with an expert view, guidance and direction that helped us with the case choice. Apart from the fact that Mats' preference was in line with our thinking, he also contributed with a very unique perspective on the specifics of the case and the angle from which an interesting discussion can arise. Collectively, we chose to develop the case of Mercedes-Benz and the failed 'Moose test', while integrating the angle of humour in times of crisis, and how and when to implement it.

A particular question we faced along the way of developing the case was to what extent we should put emphasis on the 'humour' aspect. Even though as a team, we comprehended the uniqueness and relevance of this topic, we all felt a bit apprehensive as to whether there is sufficient evidence that Mercedes-Benz firmly used humour to deal with the crisis. In fact, in our research, we found little empirical evidence proving what and when Mercedes-Benz actually did in terms of humour. An apparent reason for this is that the incident happened in times when media was primality print, which makes it challenging to find readily available information about the topic online.

However, during our second supervision session with Mats, he supported us in emphasising the humour angle and exploring it, even if there was little information on the management decision. Ultimately, we concluded that this topic would be more unique and compelling, and most importantly, beneficial to the discussion.

In conclusion, this case assignment provided us with invaluable practical skills. Specifically, it made us reflect on the relevance of embracing humour as a shield for the brand reputation, and the potential consequences for the brand identity and the brand personality. We are hopeful this case can inspire engaging discussions and will serve beneficially anyone who aspires to dive into the brand management field.

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