



# **MOST HATED UNETHICAL MARKETING PRACTICE REVEALED**

# SEVEN UNSCRUPULOUS SOLUTIONS - ONLY ONE LOSER

We reached out to senior marketers, business owners and thought leaders across multiple industries to discover how NOT to target your audience, discover leads or sell products.

Ethical thinking in UK marketing is on the rise according to a variety of surveys and polls.

Over the past year, marketing platform Semrush found there was a 287% increase in internet searches asking questions about ethical marketing.

The BBC followed suit, citing a global review by management consultancy firm Accenture, which found “60% [of people] have made more environmentally friendly, sustainable, or ethical purchases since the start of the pandemic.

“Nine out of 10 of that percentage were likely to continue doing so.”

What follows is a countdown of the 7 least ethical marketing practices: But what makes number 1? Read on to find out...





7<sup>th</sup>

# NEWSJACKING

Boosting a brand by aligning with current events or cultural issues seems like a good idea. In principle, anyway. After all, it places brands in bigger - often global - conversations, finding a new audience and aligning with events that matter to people. But in this increasingly polemic political world, a company runs the risk of alienating as many as it attracts. Is it demonstrating compassion, or simply being insincere and exploitative?

## **Brief history:**

American strategist David Meerman Scott modernised the term newsjacking after its original use in the 1970s to describe the theft of UK newspapers and selling them to scrap dealers.

Gemma Banks, Senior Marketing Director of email marketing experts Klaviyo:

“

*Quite a number of brands are desperate to get into the metaverse hype, [but] we found that over 58% of British consumers don't even know what it is. So, always put the customer first. Know your customer and know how they want to be communicated with. If they're not interested in the metaverse then park that avatar and focus on something more meaningful.”*

2%

## **Examples:**

GAP not bringing the nation together (THE WEEK)  
Bristol Dry Gin's 'looting and shooting' (BBC)



6<sup>th</sup>

4%

# GREENWASHING

Branding your product as eco-friendly, green or sustainable when, just maybe, those claims are slightly inflated, is undoubtedly a bad take. It also muddies the water when a lot of businesses are attempting to clean up their act in good faith. And with Governments and policy makers squabbling over how to reach Net Zero in the nearish future, brands need to back up their claims with hard, irrefutable evidence.

## Brief history:

The term came into being after environmentalist Jay Westerveld exposed the hotel industry's ploy for customers to reuse their towels seemingly to conserve water and help the planet, but in reality it simply helped hotels save on laundry bills.

Louise Findlay-Wilson, founder and managing director of Energy PR:

“

*Greenwashing is the ultimate marketing mistake. Being dishonest about your company's impact on the environment is a sure-fire way to undermine consumer trust in your brand and, once lost, this confidence is incredibly difficult to win back.*”

## Examples:

[Volkswagen's emission test debacle \(BBC\)](#)

[Nestle and their 2025 promise \(GREENPEACE\)](#)

[H&M's unconscious collection \(BIG ISSUE\)](#)

5<sup>th</sup>



6%

# COLLABORATING WITH UNETHICAL INFLUENCERS

Valued at a record 13.8 billion US dollars last year, the influencer marketing industry is worth big money to both brands and individuals. Indeed, some would argue there are few better ways to enhance brand awareness, reach a younger, profitable audience and establish a level of trust. Yet, aligning with the wrong influencer can do untold damage, resulting in sponsorships being pulled left, right and centre.

## **Brief history:**

Dating back to ancient Rome when gladiators would endorse products, the word influencer as we know it was only added to the English dictionary in 2019. Nowadays, 'influencer' and 'celebrity' are pretty much interchangeable.

Joshua Wood, Founder and CEO of events company Bloc:

“

*With the rise of influencer marketing I think a big marketing no-no is being linked with a celebrity or influencer who has done or said something unethical. Brands need to do their research to make sure nothing might come out later that could be damaging. It's also a case of anticipating whether that influencer or celebrity has the kind of personality who might go rogue in the future.*”

## **Examples:**

Kendall Jenner and Pepsi join forces (BBC)  
Irish blogger gives away too much (Independent)  
Two words: Fyre Festival (Forbes)



4<sup>th</sup>

# CLICKBAIT ARTICLE HEADLINES

Although the number of clickbait headlines will always be an estimate as more and more content is produced, a 2016 study conducted by The University of Mississippi and The University of Oklahoma found that 25% of 1.67 million Facebook posts from 153 media organisations analysed used clickbait headlines. The main criteria defining clickbait in this study was headlines not delivering on promises, which when we are talking about marketing a service or product is a clear no-no. Indeed, clickbait should be the reason brands overhaul their antiquated measures of online marketing success by clicks if nothing else.

## **Brief history:**

Thank blogger Jay Beiger for the word in 2006, which made headlines in the English Oxford dictionary 10 years later. Simply enough, it combines the click of a mouse with the bait needed to attract a reader.

Michael Campbell from Faze Digital, a collective of digital media experts:

“

*Clickbait marketing brings display advertising into disrepute. This includes major websites who allow ads along the lines of '17 outrageous credit card hacks'. Click and you'll land on a poorly written article that is riddled with more ads. The purpose of this is to drive revenue for the publisher while delivering no real value to the reader. This needs to stop.*”



11%



3<sup>rd</sup>

# NON-TRANSPARENT DATA USE

The importance of using precise consumer data is not lost on marketers, advertisers and businesses; the Third Industrial Revolution has made data one of the most valuable assets around.

If you believe Apple (and who wouldn't?) and their recent privacy changes, our data is worth a tragic \$227 billion-a-year. But as the online population grows ever-more savvy, they either opt-out or want something in return for this goldmine of information so transparency is a must. After all, consultants Axiom found in 2020 that "83% of consumers want to see a clear link between the data they share and the direct benefits this provides them".

CEO of Mindshare UK, Jem Lloyd-Williams:

“

*For me, respecting the privacy of the people you are marketing to is paramount. Whether on one of your owned platforms, or on a third parties', great care should be taken to use someone's presence, or the data they create or share, in an ethical way. We've developed a Data Ethics Compass at Mindshare that enables us to quickly qualify the use of data in media execution against a set of criteria. The Compass then uses its algorithm to score the tactic ethically. This gives clients surety that the tactics we're using fit their ethical standards (and are legally compliant, of course).*”

**Examples:**

Yahoo's data breach of 2017 (NEW YORK TIMES)

LinkedIn's similar data breach of 2021 (FORTUNE)

17%

An illustration on the left side of the page shows a large hand in a dark suit pointing its index finger towards a small silhouette of a businessman in a suit running away from the edge of a cliff. The businessman is carrying a briefcase. A thin vertical line connects the top of the cliff to a circular callout containing the number '2nd'. At the bottom of the cliff, another circular callout contains the number '19%'.

2<sup>nd</sup>

19%

# CONCEALING IMPORTANT INFORMATION

By omitting certain details, which just happen to be vital, is a great way to generate leads, but not the best for actual sales. Depriving potential customers of the accurate information they need to make well-informed decisions means they are unlikely to return, while companies will quickly gain a well-earned reputation for being untrustworthy.

The UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) has advice for any brand still unclear: “All relevant information, including significant conditions to an offer, should be made clear in the ad itself. These should be stated close, or clearly linked, to the main claim.”

Will Brooks, CEO of business publisher Raconteur:

“

*Starting at...’ pricing is a personal bugbear of mine. Travel brands and hotels are probably the worst offenders, but this marketing practice can be seen in other sectors. Here’s how it works: businesses lure you in with beautiful photography and clever copy, which states that their ‘prices start from just...’. But click on the advert and you’ll find that price only applies if you book the room with a communal bathroom, located in the basement, on Tuesday nights in January, if there’s a full moon.*”

## Examples:

[Colegate and 80% of dentists \(MANCHESTER EVENING NEWS\)](#)

[Chemence glue maker comes unstuck \(FTC\)](#)

[ADT insecure about experts \(FTC\)](#)





1<sup>st</sup>

41%

# TARGETING THE VULNERABLE

The most egregious marketers of them all, as decided by our survey, are those who deliberately target consumers who least need the product or service in question. Vulnerability is a particularly difficult attribute to pin down, especially in potential customers, but for those within this category in terms of finance, age or mental health, being bombarded with promotions, cold-calling or any of the other 6 unethical practices listed above is particularly unpalatable.

Professor Adrian Palmer, Head of Marketing and Reputation at Henley Business School:

“

*Caveat emptor' – the buyer knows best – is being squeezed into a corner where marketers can no longer rely on it. Societies increasingly recognise that consumers don't make mistakes in buying – it is sellers who make mistakes in selling. We have long recognised that children need to be protected from their own buying ignorance. But the list of people who need to be protected from themselves is growing, not just as specific individuals, but as individuals at a specific time and in a specific context. Essentially, it is unethical for marketers to sell to people who the marketer should know are vulnerable to unfair persuasion. Smart marketers are ahead of the curve and make sure they don't exploit vulnerable buyers.*”

## Examples:

[Sky Bet asked to pay out \[GUARDIAN\]](#)

[Wrong type of awards for Kellogg's and McDonald's \[PARENTS' VOICE\]](#)

# ABOUT US

Through our cutting-edge series of B2B and B2C brands, New Statesman Media Group understands there are sustainable, ethical ways to deal with the defining issues of our time and our aim is to cover them, from macro-economics and politics, to technology and the environment.

New Statesman Media Group is home to some of the most influential, historic and engaging brands in the world, from the leading progressive political and cultural titan **New Statesman** to the media must-have **Press Gazette**. We also boast luxury lifestyle titles, industry-leading data-driven websites and close relationships with events champion **PMI** and gold standard data provider **GlobalData**.

## **Find out more about us:**

[New Statesman Media Group – Digital Media, Martech and Events Group](#)



## And finally a word from our friends at The Global Marketing Alliance on ethical marketing:

“

*The recent festive season brought on the annual barrage of tear jerking emotional advertising campaigns. Whilst I don't think they are all unethical, I do believe most are targeted at the vulnerable. Charities have been found particularly guilty of this.*

*An emotional response is central to their marketing effectiveness. However, I feel that some of them use the wrong tone and context. Sometimes pushing the boundaries a little too far. This subsequently makes their marketing feel more like con artistry.*

*Targeted and thought through correctly, brands who feel the need to latch onto emotional marketing, do so because it works. The conversion rate is high as we reach for our tissues and our wallets. But is it ethical? ”*

Matt Edgar, Founder and Managing Partner,  
Global Marketing Alliance

“

*Brands today seem to have a heightened focus on leveraging ethical values. Marketing executives and business leaders have read how millennials and Gen-Z are motivated by higher ideals than narrow interest when making buying decisions. The display of moral virtue has become the norm across the advertising world. Each brand is indistinguishable from the next. Shoe horns and crowbars are the weapons of choice as they seek to find a link between brand and fashionable cause of the day.*

*Of course, brands can – and should – do good. And there are plenty of examples of brands getting it right. WHSmith's recent campaign to increase reading rates in the UAE is a good example. The ethics espoused were sewn into the DNA of the brand - a part of its business model - not outsourced to a marketing department to convey, based on a print-out of brand values. The latter amounts to exploitative marketing which is, in itself, unethical.”*

Mel Dixon, Editor, Global Marketing Alliance