





Carnivore Club has made a name for itself with bold ads that have paid off for the Toronto company. But some have labelled them sexist and sophomoric. Founder Tim Ray, wonders: How far is too far?

PETER POWER/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED DECEMBER 3, 2014

UPDATED MAY 12, 2018

PUBLISHED DECEMBER 3, 2014

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Each week, we seek expert advice to help a small or medium-sized business overcome a key issue.

When Tim Ray set up an IndieGogo campaign last year to kickstart funding for Carnivore Club, his meat-of-the-month subscription concept, he knew he'd have to produce a marketing campaign that would stand out from the crowd.

The result, "Man as Vegan," exploited gender stereotypes for laughs. In the ad, which appeared on the crowd-funding site, a woman in yoga gear prepares a green smoothie in the kitchen as she brags to a friend about how virile her boyfriend has become since she convinced him to go vegan. In another room, the boyfriend mocks her claims while attributing his newfound virility to the Carnivore Club's selection of fancy meats.

Mr. Ray, 34, had recently sold his first e-commerce business, FoodScrooge.com, after a successful stint on Dragon's Den. The Toronto-based entrepreneur had a sense the commercial's potential for controversy would generate the attention he desired.

He was right. Despite an initial deluge of negative feedback from those who found the messaging sexist and sophomoric, the commercial resulted in a doubling of his initial fundraising goal, to \$22,000 from \$10,000.

And while he lost out on some partnership interest, Mr. Ray says he's happy he stuck to his vision. "We had a great opportunity to do a deal with American Express. They loved the product but they ended up backing away because of our controversial marketing."

The bold humour, however, has "really paid off as far as getting us where we are today," he says.

Carnivore Club has 500 regular subscribers who pay \$50 a month for a box of cured – and curated – meats including duck breast prosciutto, bison jerky and artisanal cured sausages. During the holiday season, Mr. Ray says he and his staff of six can fill orders for more than 2,000 boxes per month.

In June, he launched in Britain. But the branding that worked so well in Canada failed to translate there. "The female consumer in the U.K. finds the humour distasteful and sexist." Mr. Ray decided to remove the video from the British website.

In January, Carnivore Club will launch a splashy new marketing campaign created by Canadian advertising giant Bensimon Byrne. The new commercial will "make the old video seem PG-13," he says.

Mr. Ray considered how the raunchy humour in his marketing message might affect sales, but "at the end of the day if we were to whitewash it down we wouldn't draw the attention we do," he concludes. He does note, however, that he has steered away from the original "guy's guy" credo in the new commercial and taken a stab at what he feels is more inclusive humour.

Mr. Ray is confident the video will have a good reception in North America, but he's unsure how it will affect his already tenuous foothold in the British market.

"I have no idea how they're going to react but I suspect the humour will outweigh the derogatory messaging," he says with some optimism.

THE CHALLENGE: Should Carnivore Club stick with its raunchy humour, or embrace a more palatable campaign abroad, if not at home too?

THE EXPERTS WEIGH IN

Peter Bolt, senior vice-president and managing partner at the Britain-based digital marketing agency DARE Toronto

While I'm a big fan of advertising that cuts through, I would challenge Tim that the core to his appeal and success hasn't been from the type of humour, but rather because he has, perhaps inadvertently, hit upon something more fundamental – something along the lines of "man's primal love of meat."

With a real understanding of his brand's "truth" he can use this as the basis of his positioning to extend the brand to other markets. My experience is people are attracted to brands that fundamentally know who they are and remain true to that. In most cases, fundamental truths, unlike tone or in some cases humour, transcend borders quite well. My advice is find your brand's truth that's compelling and motivating (not sexist) and those who buy into your truth will come flocking.

Janet Desautels, program director for culture training at the business-education entity Center for Organizational Cultural Competence, Calgary

The key to cross-cultural business success is capitalizing on the differences and similarities between the cultures in a positive way. It's important to recognize that even when we're approaching a culture that looks the same, there are many cultural nuances that, if missed, could be very costly to a business.

This doesn't necessarily mean compromising Tim's vision. It means building a bridge and finding common ground for the roots of successful commerce to flourish. And the key to that is suspending assumptions about how and whether humor should be used in marketing. I would recommend researching British culture and finding out what humour works in their ads, and how their gender relations play out. It helps to get clear on your own cultural preferences that are likely embedded in the original campaign, taking those right off the table and starting again.

Will Poho, founder of the outerwear firm Moose Knuckles, Toronto

Our products are sold in more than 40 countries. Since our inception, we have been known for our racy and often provocative campaigns. About a year ago, I produced a video depicting a fake French Canadian army in the planning stages of taking over Canada. The idea came from the old FLQ movement in the 1960s and again by the Red Square movement of 2012.

The video stirred up a great deal of controversy. I got called everything from Quebec racist to sexist pig and Nazi. The video was discussed in every major Canadian newspaper. Ultimately I got the attention I wanted, offending a very few with big mouths but creating a very strong brand loyalty with the many.

I like Tim's marketing a lot. Yes, it is a bit juvenile, but today's large corporations do actual damage by marketing harmful products with slick campaigns and celebrity endorsements, like Coca-Cola, which sponsored the Olympics but is full of high-fructose corn syrup. Tim's strategy at best makes people laugh and at worst irks a few prudish Brits. He's to be commended for not mimicking the marketing strategies that are less offensive but cause real harm.

THREE THINGS THE COMPANY COULD DO NOW

Find your truth

Focus on a more fundamental marketing message, not one based on humour or tone.

Look for cultural nuances

If they are missed, they could be very costly.

Embrace your style

Your strategy at best makes people laugh and at worst irks a few prudish people.

Facing a challenge? If your company could use expert help, please contact us at smallbusiness@globeandmail.com.

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