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# Idea Watch

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MARKETING

## Make the Most of a Polarizing Brand

Start by measuring "brand dispersion," and then use these strategies to drive sales. *by Xueming Luo, Michael Wiles, and Sascha Raithel*

**A**s conversation starters go, "What do you think of Miracle Whip?" probably seems unlikely—you wouldn't think many people have strong opinions about the slightly-sweeter-than-mayonnaise sandwich spread. But when marketers at Kraft began researching shoppers' attitudes toward the dressing, they found surprisingly deep emotions. It turns out that a substantial number of people love Miracle Whip, and many others detest it. In 2011 Kraft launched ads that sought to make a virtue of the schism. The campaign used love-'em-or-hate-'em celebrities, including Pauly D from *Jersey Shore* and the political pundit James Carville. Some people in the ads praised Miracle Whip's yumminess, but one character said he'd break up with his girlfriend if he learned that she liked the dressing. Another said, "I'd rather lick your shoe" than try it. "Miracle Whip is a polarizing product," the brand director, Sara Braun, explained at the time. "We're trying to own up to this fact." The strategy

worked: During the campaign Miracle Whip experienced a 631% surge in social media postings and a 14% increase in sales.

When political campaign managers are formulating strategy, they measure their candidates' negative polling numbers as a matter of course—after all, knowing what share of the electorate will never be persuaded to vote for the candidate is essential to determining how to approach undecided voters. Brand managers must learn to think the same way. Marketers gauging consumer attitudes have traditionally relied on “mean” or “net” scores, but those metrics can paint a misleading picture. A brand with a middling score may, in fact, be highly polarizing, with large numbers of fervent supporters and passionate detractors canceling one another out. Identifying these instances is increasingly important, because social media give brand haters ready outlets for broadcasting their dislike. Moreover, our research, which evaluated various brands' polarization and then examined the relationship between polarization and stock market returns, suggests that highly polarizing brands tend to perform more poorly than others, but they also tend to be less risky—to exhibit relatively little variation in stock price.

To thrive in this environment, brand managers need new strategies. These start with understanding and using a new metric, which we call *brand dispersion*, that measures polarization. Managers also need to realize that having a group of consumers who hate your brand can be a *good* thing: Some companies have boosted sales by increasing the number of product haters.

To understand brand dispersion, consider a simple example based on two hypothetical brands, A and B. Suppose that each brand's manager surveys three consumers, asking them to rate the brand on a scale from 1 (very poor) to 7 (excellent). Brand A receives ratings of 3, 4, and 5, while Brand B receives ratings of 1, 4, and 7. Thus, the two brands have the same mean score, 4, but behind that mean lies an important difference: Brand A's scores are clustered tightly together, but Brand B's are widely

dispersed—it has one brand lover and one brand hater. Brand B is polarizing.

In a real-world situation, there are various ways to measure polarization. One of the simplest is to look at the percentage of consumers who give a brand a rating of 6 or 7 and the percentage who give it a 1 or 2. The higher the percentages of brand lovers *and* brand haters, the greater the polarization. For instance, McDonald's is a highly polarizing brand—33% of consumers love it, and 29% hate it. Intel has low polarization: It, too, is loved by 33% of consumers, but it is hated by only 3%. Another way to determine polarization is to calculate the standard deviation of consumers' overall ratings; higher standard deviations indicate greater polarization. This method is more precise and can be especially useful when brands are rated on 3-point or 5-point scales. In our experience, though, the two methods usually produce similar results.

### Capitalizing on Polarization

If your analysis reveals that your brand exhibits a high degree of polarization, here are three strategies to consider:

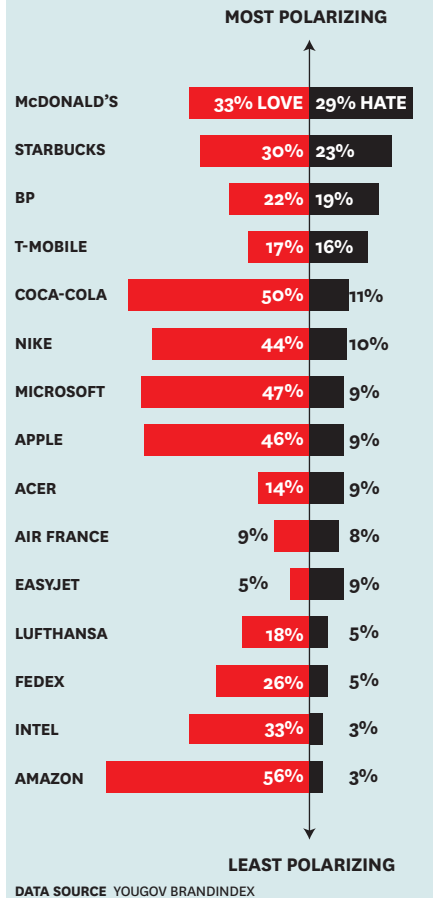
**Placate the haters.** One way to reduce polarization is to do what most of us do when confronted with people who dislike us: try to change the haters' minds. This is the strategy that usually feels the most straightforward and comfortable. Brand managers who successfully deploy it reduce negative word of mouth and create a larger pool of potential buyers.

General Mills followed this approach in the late 2000s. Its Betty Crocker brand, best known for cake mixes, icing, and other cook-at-home dessert products, was suffering because of rising concern about obesity, a consumer shift toward low-carb products, and criticism of food industry marketing techniques. At the beginning of 2008, 4.5% of consumers could be classified as Betty Crocker haters.

General Mills took several steps to assuage the brand's critics. In April 2009 it started a social network, MyBlogSpark, to promote Betty Crocker and other brands

## THE POLARIZATION OF SELECTED BRANDS

Many managers rely on net scores, which average brand lovers and haters to come up with a single number. To understand polarization, unbundle those averages, as researchers did for these top brands:



in its portfolio, putting up its own posts to defuse bloggers' complaints. That year Betty Crocker became the first major brand to develop a gluten-free baking mix. It soon partnered with celiac disease foundations and started a website for consumers, liveglutenfreely.com. By May 2011 (the most recent period for which we have data) the share of Betty Crocker brand haters had dropped to 2.8%. That's a significant drop, but any reduction in haters matters, because even a small number can do damage: Research shows that negative word of mouth can greatly influence neutral consumers.

**Poke the haters.** Some companies succeed by intentionally antagonizing brand detractors. This can create buzz

and reinforce the brand's connection with its most enthusiastic consumers, because people often feel compelled to defend a favorite product that has come under attack. And the defense mounted by fans often sways neutral consumers into becoming supporters.

Ryanair, a pioneering European discount airline, has long needled critics of its no-frills service by making tongue-in-cheek proposals for new ways to trim amenities. Because it is known for taking unusual cost-cutting measures (for example, it charges €70 to print a boarding pass at the airport), the difference between its genuine proposals and ones offered in jest can be hard to tell. In 2010 and 2011, for instance, the airline announced that it would begin charging for access to toilets on board, remove two toilets from each plane (leaving just one), create a standing-room-only section, and impose a "fat tax" on overweight passengers. The only change it actually made was the removal of some toilets—but each provocative announcement put the company in the headlines and cemented its reputation for going to great lengths to offer rock-bottom fares.

**Amplify a polarizing attribute.** Often a single characteristic is responsible for the deep schism between a brand's fans and its detractors. Instead of seeking to narrow the gap and reduce the haters' rancor, as General Mills did with Betty Crocker, some companies decide to create new products that amplify the point of differentiation, in the hope of bolstering loyalty among (and revenue from) diehard fans.

Consider Marmite, the distinctive salty British condiment. Ever since its inception, in 1902, it has been a polarizing product because of its strong taste; indeed, its tagline is "Love it or hate it." To amp up enthusiasm among its most ardent fans, in 2010 Marmite debuted Marmite XO—an extra-strength version. Using social media, the company identified 30 consumers who were especially devoted to the brand, invited them to taste testings (complete with Marmite-flavored cocktails), and set up a Facebook group. The promotion generated

more than 54,000 visits to the company's website and 300,000 Facebook page views, and retailers sold out of Marmite XO as soon as it arrived on their shelves.

### Creating Polarization

Sometimes a product or brand isn't inherently polarizing, but marketers may want to introduce polarization in order to differentiate it from a strong competitor or to make it stand apart from a crowded field. Here are two tactics companies in this position can take:

**Drive a wedge in the market.** Because they know that trying to "be all things to all people" can backfire, marketers often target a specific consumer segment. In some cases, such segmentation increases polarization, which in turn can boost revenue.

This played out recently in the UK market for alcoholic cider. For centuries cider has been consumed much as beer is—served without ice, often in working-class pubs. But in 2006 sales of Magners, a popular brand, soared after a promotional campaign touted it as a refreshing iced summer beverage. The ads helped turn Magners into a hip drink for young upscale professionals, a demographic that hadn't consumed much cider in the past.

The leading brand of cider, Strongbow, observed this success with some envy. Strongbow could have responded by making its own play for the young professional crowd. But it recognized a different opportunity. The serve-it-over-ice campaign had turned Magners into a seasonal drink, and as a result, its sales dropped sharply during cooler months. In addition, the brand's trendiness had distanced working-class consumers from the cider. Realizing that the market was beginning to segment, Strongbow decided to invest more heavily in the core market, even if that meant losing newer consumers. In 2009 it launched an ad campaign with the tagline "Bowtime: Hard Earned," featuring images of working-class drinkers hoisting glasses of Strongbow as a reward for a hard day on the job. The strategy succeeded: Although hipsters

began to view Strongbow negatively, its appeal among traditional cider drinkers intensified—and as polarization increased, so did sales. Strongbow has maintained its leading position in bars and pubs, and in 2009 its sales in the fast-growing off-trade market rose by 23%—beating sales in the overall cider market by 6%.

**Launch a provocative ad.** In other instances, marketers may try to increase a brand's visibility by running ads all but designed to turn off a certain share of viewers. That was the case with Progressive Insurance, which in 2008 began running a series of ads featuring a superpeppy character named Flo. In contrast to its rivals Geico and Aflac, which built ads around friendly animals (a gecko and a duck), Progressive made Flo a real person with a big personality—knowing that although some viewers would adore her, others might find her annoying. And they did: Facebook now hosts "I hate Flo" groups, and Progressive routinely appears high on lists of most-disliked ads. But the campaign and the negative reaction raised brand awareness and increased sales.

Brand managers, like other managers, are gaining access to new kinds of data and becoming increasingly sophisticated at using it. Learning to assess and exploit brand dispersion is a natural step in this progression. Managers should avoid relying on averages; they need to dig deeper to uncover and understand the full range of attitudes toward their products. Although this is especially critical for polarizing brands, all firms should be cognizant of their brands' dispersion and should track it over time. Fueled by social media, pockets of haters can quickly develop and spread, even for brands that once enjoyed uniform appeal. Companies need to respond strategically. ♥

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