

# MarketingWeek

Opinion

## Mark Ritson: Heineken should remember marketing is about profit, not purpose

Heineken's new purpose-driven ad might express all the right values, but marketers must remember if you don't use your budget to create sales, you've failed.



By [Mark Ritson](#) 10 May 2017



The ad of the month is clearly the new 'Open Your World' four-minute spot from [Heineken](#). The campaign has created acres of coverage and tons of social media response. But is it any good? Before I answer that question, let me tell you about an experience I had a couple of years ago.

I was invited to pitch to the global marketing team of a large, prestigious brand. They were looking for a major piece of international marketing training. I was up against two bigger firms but I fancied my chances given I knew the sector well and the company in question had specifically invited me to make a presentation.

Off I went to their European HQ for a presentation of my credentials and some examples of the programmes I had designed and delivered for other clients. It was going very well and, to be honest, I was already starting to think about the long and enjoyable road ahead. Near the end of my meeting one of the client team asked me why I so clearly enjoyed being a marketing professor. It's a familiar question and I launched straight into my usual answer.

"Money," I explained. "I like making money for clients." This is true by the way. More than clever strategies or cool executions, the thing I adore most about working with companies is coming up with a strategy that eventually makes them very large sums of money; money that, without my and their intervention, would otherwise not have transpired. I waxed lyrically about how aroused I get when a strategy works and money is made for quite a while.

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When I finished my little soliloquy, you could have cut the air with a knife. Something I had said had clearly gone down very poorly. Before I knew it the meeting was over and I was outside in the cold car park, blinking.

A few days later when I was told I had not won the business I drowned my sorrows with my oldest mate Simon and took him through the whole sad tale. I was convinced that the marketing team were purpose-driven and had seen my little profit speech as incongruous with their belief systems about marketing. When I explained that I was 90% sure I had lost the work because of my financial focus he scoffed and provided a (very long) set of more probable reasons for rejection which started with me being "a tosser".

I knew he was only trying to make me feel better but his incredulity that you could lose a marketing pitch because you wanted to make money shows how little Simon knew about marketing and how strangely detached from commercial reality our little profession has become in recent years.

## **Heineken's job is selling beer**

Before we go any further, it's important to make two things very clear. First, I do care about things other than money, but I handle them in what I like to call 'my life'. It might just be me but I find it entirely possible to go to work for clients and focus on financial things and then, with the rest of the time I get each week, devote myself to more important pursuits like family, animals and occasionally good works.

Second, just because I am driven entirely by making money for companies, I would never do that at the expense of the planet or employees or any other core ethical concern. Again, however, I have found it curiously simple to be profit-driven without finding that a contradiction with principles of decency and responsibility.

I guess what I am trying to say is that, whatever Simon might tell you, I am not a superficial shit. But I really do think the reason marketers are employed is to make money for the companies that employ them. Preferably lots of it. And that's why I love marketing.

With that long preamble over, let me tell you what I think about the much-debated Heineken ad. I think it's crap. Absolute crap.

Again, let me provide a couple of caveats to this viewpoint. First, I agree with and support all the viewpoints expressed within the ad, namely: transgender rights, feminism and climate change.

Cindy Tervoort, head of marketing at Heineken UK, [speaks very eloquently about the need](#) to “inspire more people to focus on the things that unite us rather than divide us” with this new campaign and again I concur with each and every word. I also think Heineken is a fine beverage and one that I regularly invest a significant amount of my time and money consuming. But I do not see what these important topics and this lovely beer have to do with each other.

Step back from the powerful four-minute Heineken ad for just 30 seconds and ask yourself why Heineken is the featured brand? Couldn't any other brand pull this off with equal legitimacy? Surely this ad would work just as well with Guinness, Becks, Strongbow, Stella Artois or a host of other beverages.

This is not an ad about Heineken, it's an ad about people having a beer (with a small b) to talk over their differences. As proof of that consider the ad itself, which has only fleeting images of the Heineken brand. In an ad with more than 1,000 words of dialogue not once do we hear the word Heineken uttered. There are no distinctively Heineken elements, almost no product shots and if you had to estimate an overall figure only about 2% of the whole four-minute mega-production actually features the brand or product at all.

Across the UK this week the Open Your World ad has undoubtedly spawned significant viral chatter. But how much of it revolved around Heineken and how much about “that beer ad with them people in it”. I bet I know the answer.

Perhaps Tervoort and her team at Heineken have very clear data showing that if British beer drinkers associate a brand with transgender rights, environmental protection and feminism they will switch brands. Or, and this is my suspicion, Heineken has joined the increasingly large posse of brands that have stopped seeing marketing as a way to grow awareness, drive preference and ultimately increase sales.

Instead, branding is about beliefs, missions and lofty ideals. Every brand and every newly arrived CMO is not looking for a surge in sales; instead they want to link their brand to a cultural issue faster than you can say ‘purpose’. Travel brands promote marriage equality. Cola brands push for youth protest. Insurance brands celebrate racial equality. And none of it makes any commercial sense.

## **Why is profit so ‘uncool’?**

I think brands have switched from an overt commercial focus to an abstract, belief-based approach for a number of reasons. First marketing is soft and full of people that don't even understand gross profit, let alone possess the desire to increase it.

Second, most marketers are incredibly embarrassed to admit that they spend 40 hours a week getting people to consume more of something. That's achingly uncool and sounds appallingly prosaic. Imagine telling someone at a dinner party in W1 that you work very hard to get people to drink more of your beer each week. That would be a nightmare.

But if I can talk about my work to create films that bring people together and reduce hate crimes and environmental destruction even Jane, the woman who works for Médecins Sans Frontières, will approve and perhaps be my friend.

I grow sick and tired of the apparent lack of commercial focus that grips our discipline.

I encourage you to read [our profile of Kenny Jacobs, Ryanair's CMO](#), this week. I hope he does not mind me saying this but Jacobs is incredibly uncool. He is so uncool he even makes me, usually the least trendy person in Marketing Week, look like Mark Ronson. His interview and whole worldview of marketing is strikingly straightforward and incredibly commercial.

That makes him not only uncool but also very brave and supremely impressive. Typically, when a senior marketer gets a profile in the marketing press they wank on about beliefs, brand mission and their fascination with artificial intelligence. They do that because that's what everyone else does and because marketing these days is not about profit, it's about purpose.

I'm sorry to sound cynical but, as I traverse the conference halls and seminar rooms of the world at various marketing functions, I grow sick and tired of the apparent lack of commercial focus that grips our discipline. Of course, the counter argument is that beliefs-based businesses are also more profitable too. Brand purpose and commercial probity are, very handily, one and the same thing, don't you know?

That was the theme of the recent book 'Grow' from the inestimable Jim Stengel, the former head of marketing at P&G. It's still widely cited in the trendy purpose-driven sessions on marketing around the world. No-one mentions [the outstanding work of Richard Shotton](#), who has taken Stengel's much trumpeted link between purpose and profit and torn it up into small arse-shaped pieces of paper and sprinkled them all over the floor.

Clearly the Heineken ad has created a dialogue and, hopefully, promoted a series of progressive causes and the whole notion of respect for divergent viewpoints. But what it will not do is help Heineken sell any more beer. The ads certainly won't do the brand any harm because, unlike [Pepsi's recent beliefs-based campaign](#), this is a well-made and thoughtful ad (being free of any member of the Kardashian clan also helps).

But just because a campaign does no harm, or perhaps a little good, does not make it a success. There is the important issue of opportunity cost to contend with, and what Heineken could have done with the money. What would have been the outcome had Heineken invested the money, time and other resources they ploughed into world peace and mutual understanding into selling a bit of beer with a strongly branded campaign for Heineken instead?

Somewhere between the commodifying monochrome of physical and mental availability and the achingly cool, belief-based world of 'inspiring communities to be great' is a middle path. A path we can call differentiated brand image. Heineken isn't just a familiar, green beer that you can buy right now. Nor is it an important agent in achieving world harmony. It's something in between.

And the sooner we get back to that and focus on it, the sooner we can start making money again. Assuming, of course, you're interested.