

The Internet Is Forever. When Should Brands Capitalize on Trending Pop Culture References?

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Who doesn't love a meme or pop culture moment? Especially when it seems like all of the internet wants to be a part of a collective memory or joke. Leveraging trending pop culture references can be a goldmine for brands looking to connect with their audience.

As I'm writing this, you may have someone from your team asking if you should jump on the "Hawk Tuah" trend, since it's still gaining traction and the girl behind it seems to be everywhere. Hopefully, the following will go beyond the traditional advice of playing it safe *or* doing it because enough other large brands are posting about it.

The key question remains: When and why should brands dive into current trends? And, say it with me now, it depends. Let's break down what it depends on.

Brand safety

Brand safety isn't what it used to be if it ever really was.

Your ad could be shown alongside content in the feed that is counter to the messaging you want near your brand, and yet it's the risk you take for guaranteed views. We're seeing more and more AI ad content being created while we also have brands navigating how to deal with major issues during an election year. The internet is a controversial and precarious place and yet, brands know they need to show up and be present.

The ever-present desire for attention, views and engagement has brands abandoning brand safety for earned media and virality, chasing attention at all costs and linking themselves with memes and references that you would never even dream of proposing let alone pressuring legal to approve.

Timing

Jumping on a trending topic can gain significant attention, but timing is crucial. Catch a trend too early and your audience might be confused. Too late, and you'll come off as trying too hard. The sweet spot is in the middle, where the trend is recognizable but not yet saturated. Being best friends with your legal and comms teams is priceless here as these moments can age quickly and no one wants to be the brand that got approval two weeks too late.

Timing isn't just about when a trend peaks; it's also about your brand's agility. Here are some questions to consider:

- Do we have set rules with legal and comms about what we can and can't mention as a brand?
- Does this lessen the trust that our customers/audience have in us?
- Does this align with who we are as a brand or align with our Ideal Customer Profile (ICP)?
- Is this a short-term play for attention and engagement,

or are we a brand that strives to be culturally relevant?

- Do we have long-term initiatives to entertain or be “in the know” with our audience?

Engaging with trends should never come at the expense of your brand’s trust and authenticity. If your audience sees your attempt as inauthentic, they could lose faith in your brand and not take you as seriously. Does jumping on this make sense in a way where your audience might be delighted and amused that you jumped into the conversation versus feeling like the brand is begging for attention?

Always consider whether a trending reference aligns with brand values and messaging. Playful references are an easy way to explore these opportunities without breaking through your brand guardrails. If so, what would this look like? Will you reference a certain movie scene or meme that isn’t tainted by any current scandals?

It’s not enough to question brand safety when considering jumping on to a trend; one needs to recognize if the customer base would get the reference in the first place. Is this a popular trend or do you have to be chronically online to get it?

Audience

Reading the room is essential when engaging with pop culture moments. How could this age badly?

Pop culture trends can be fleeting, and what’s funny or relevant today could be outdated—or worse, offensive—tomorrow. Assess whether your current audience is talking about it, and more critically, what the sentiment around it is. Engaging with a trend that is controversial or negatively perceived could backfire, harming your brand’s reputation.

The social strategist doesn’t show their experience in saying

yes to every trend that is possible to jump on, but in the ones they say no to. It can be tempting to jump on a trend in the moment, forgetting the long-lasting implications of a misstep (the internet is forever). Understanding a brand well enough to discern what are the best opportunities is the mark of a great strategist.

Cultural relevance

It's vital to balance short-term gains like engagement spikes with long-term objectives. A sudden burst of attention might feel rewarding, but it rarely builds sustained loyalty. Brands should weigh whether jumping onto a trend is a mere bid for quick attention or a genuine effort to stay culturally relevant.

There isn't necessarily a right or wrong answer to this because each brand has its own unique identity and strategy. For some, chronic trend-chasing can dilute their brand message, while for others, it's a goldmine of opportunity.

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Let's say this is a part of your long-term strategy to be culturally relevant and unabashedly push what content can be made for a brand. Lean in and show that it truly is a part of your brand's DNA. Duolingo is a great example of not just trying to be unhinged here and there. They go all the way with it and it's embedded in their brand and its perception. They leaned in and they are winning because of it.

What about B2B brands?

B2B marketing has traditionally been seen as more conservative and, some might argue, boring.

However, there's a growing push for B2B brands to show up more creatively and frankly less stuffy. Succinct, timely and sometimes even unhinged content can yield impressive

engagement. This shift isn't just about standing out; the brands that win are the ones that successfully adapt without sacrificing their core values.

That said, engagement must be relevant. Just because content is unhinged or trendy doesn't mean it will convert to revenue. It's essential to continually measure the effectiveness and alignment of these strategies with wider business objectives.

Autodesk has done the work to be thoughtful about how they approach pop culture and activate their content to act more like a B2C brand versus the traditional B2B approach.

Aligning short-term and long-term goals to these activations is critical when deciding whether to leverage a trend. Build out a process for your team to jump onto relevant content when things aren't happening, so you aren't left scrambling when you see a Slack message that says "Everyone else is doing it." Instead, it needs to fit into a broader strategy that considers both immediate engagement and eventual conversion.

Navigating the landscape of trending pop culture references requires a delicate balance. Brands must assess their readiness, ensure alignment with their values and weigh the benefits and risks. While there's no one-size-fits-all answer, thoughtful strategy and authentic engagement can lead to meaningful, lasting connections with your audience.

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