



By Richard D. Czerniawski

BUD LIGHT: WHOSE FAILURE IS IT?

The blame game is perhaps one of the most popular and widely played games worldwide. It is front and center daily in politics. Is it not?

It's also played in business. Disastrous policies, strategies, execution, etc., are laid everywhere but at the feet of those responsible.

I feel sure you've heard these proclamations before:

- "Marketing is wasting money on advertising that doesn't work."
- "The sales force is poorly trained."
- "Manufacturing isn't doing its job."
- "The access team isn't selling our differentiation."
- "R&D strapped us with a product that is not meaningfully different from our competitors."
- "The customer doesn't get it."
- "Competition engages in unethical practices."
- "The agency is only in it to win awards."

We've heard it all and more before! Sadly, we continue to hear the same excuses repeatedly.

Now Anheuser-Busch InBev leadership is playing the blame game. They're not taking responsibility for destroying Bud Light's brand identity and alienating their customer base by prominently featuring Dylan Mulvaney, a trans woman, as a brand ambassador. Instead, they're laying the blame on a third-party ad agency.

As I've stated in previous articles, this is not about Ms. Mulvaney being wrong. She's undoubtedly a credible ambassador for many other brands.

Nor is it about the consumers being wrong. Consumers from both the brand base and members of the LGBTQIA+ community are protesting the brand. It's that A-B made the wrong choice for the brand and its consumers.

What's going on? Senior A-B management lacks sound leadership. It's evident not just in the brand's precipitous decline but also in their playing the blame game.

As per the situation, senior management is missing the big picture. They place the entire controversy on the Bud Light can with Ms. Mulvaney's likeness that she proudly announced was a gift from the company to celebrate her first anniversary of coming out as a woman.



One of a Kind Can

They're distancing themselves from the can rather than their selection of Dylan Mulvaney, and putting two marketing executives on involuntary leave (which has created a stir with the LGBTQIA+ community). They find themselves caught, trying not to inflame further their formerly loyal heavy consumption consumer base nor the LGBTQIA+ community (which is also boycotting A-B for what they perceive as not supporting them.)

They're also pointing their collective fingers at a third-party ad agency. A-B has sent an announcement to their dispirited distributors informing them that:

- The company did not create the can with Ms. Mulvaney's face.
- They did not manufacture the can in any of its facilities.
- They have fired the third-party ad agency for their collaboration with Ms. Mulvaney.

They also are claiming the problem is due to a social media backlash. Well, that's not facing up to the real error. Yes, it exacerbated the situation, but shouldn't it have been anticipated?

My Grandmother often shared this maxim with me, "The fish stinks at the head." In other words, the problem with any organization lies at the top. I've seen this played out countless times throughout my career, and I'm sure you have too.

This ongoing debacle is not merely a shining example of dumb marketing but poor leadership. To me, leadership is *accepting responsibility and inspiring the trust of others to do the right things at the right time in the right way.*

Senior management is accepting responsibility for neither understanding the essence of its brand nor its consumers' identity, which led to actions that are not aligned.

Nor is it accepting responsibility for approving those actions, regardless of where the ideas originated. As the late US President Harry Truman reminded everyone, "The buck stops here."

Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, authors of *EXTREME OWNERSHIP*, state that "all success for success and failure rests with the leader."

It is the leaders who have damaged trust with the brand's (and company's) consumers, the LGBTQIA+ community, their distributors, and retailers!

They've yet to do the right thing by anyone. (They claim they will increase spending 3-fold during the summer months. However, it's about more than spending. They need to spend their marketing funding on the right things.)

I question if they know what the right things are to do or the right ways to do them. After all, based on a rather precipitous decline in sales, the continuing media attention, and new protests, they haven't done anything right or in the right way to date.

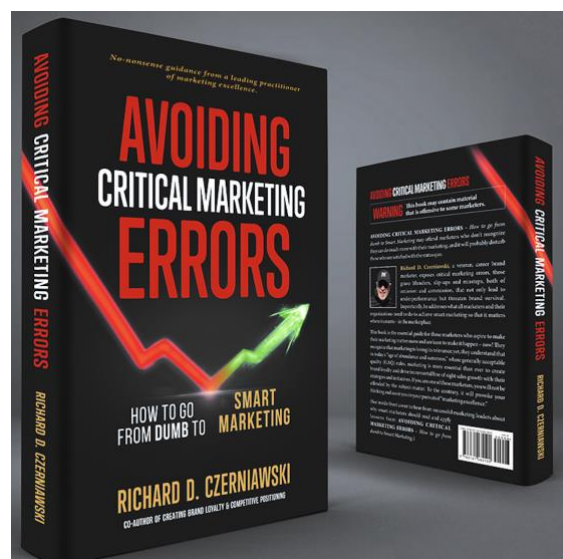
As for the right time, it has come and gone. It's so much easier to avoid than try to repair injury. It will be much more costly to bail out this sinking ship as water continues pouring in from the part of the hull submerged below the water line.

Contrast handling Bud Light with New Coke. Don Keough, former President, COO, and director of the Coca-Cola Company, appeared on national television to talk about the failure of New Coke, admitting the error, and acknowledging that the consumer is "our boss." Check it out here.

<https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=Youtube+Don+Keough+Talk+regarding+New+and+Classic+Coke&view=detail&mid=F44DBFF6E8B4E7D52005F44DBFF6E8B4E7D52005&FORM=VIRE>

Exercise authentic leadership—extreme ownership. Take responsibility. Avoiding playing the blame game will make your marketing (and organization performance) matter more!

Make your marketing matter more. Please read my most recent book, **AVOIDING CRITICAL MARKETING ERRORS: How to Go from Dumb to Smart Marketing.** Learn more here: <http://bdn-intl.com/avoiding-critical-marketing-errors>. It will help you avoid critical marketing errors and, importantly, suggest actions you can take to make your marketing matter even more.



Also, please follow me on LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/richarddczerniawski/>, where I share my perspectives from 50 years of successful worldwide brand marketing experience.

Peace and best wishes in not just avoiding critical marketing errors but making your marketing matter even more,

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