

Fooling Around Is Fine, But Avoid Being Foolhardy

From an marketing ROI point of view let the straight faced bean counters too have a hearty laugh at least once every year

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by Anirban Chaudhuri

Playing pranks on the first day of April has a long tradition. While there is no definitive story around the origin of this ritual, most say it is rooted in the advent of Georgian calendar that started from January 01 where some still ignorant of the fact clung on to April 01 to start the new year. They were probably laughed at and made fun of to set the ball of pranks rolling for ages. Innocuous fun is the essence of April Fool's Day.

Keeping with this tradition, brands have been leveraging the day with seemingly predictable yet intriguing enough to fall prey stories of new features, new products or services or offers. In current times, with the omnipresence of social media there is all the more reason for brands to explore innovative ideas to play prank with consumers or customers and try to garner as much pie of the day's conversation as possible. The tech companies are natural suspects in this carnival of fooling people. But even brands operating in the brick and mortar world too have impressive record in displaying their sense of humour. Last year KFC India's Yellow American Mustard and Sweet Chilli Lip Balm were hilariously funny. Chocolate seems to be another flavour of the tricks play – Uber Eats' Anti-aging Ice-cream in chocolate or Burger King's Chocolate Whopper hoax is a clear testimony. Ola drivers as news network reporters in an era of going hyper local or Google's File Go are takes on modern living. Ola did run an April Fool's Day video this year too where they spoke about mobile restrooms.

While the obsession with the day to show case your witty side and win hearty laughs from consumers and customers alike is understandable, increasingly brand custodians are also questioning the return of investment (ROI) linked to April Fool's Day spends. How do consumers feel about such pranks? Looking at social media conversations on April Fool pranks would be a good measure to have a view on this.

Carol Feigenbaum in an article on Netbase blog points out two interesting points from the analyses of social sentiments around April fool's day activities. Consumers do not wait for the day and thus there is no point investing in a build up to April Fool's activities. In her data analysis she did not find any conversation that was in anticipation of any prank before the day. And the second observation is also very important to note – it is just a day's conversation that you gain if things are done right. There seems to be no aftermath of this conversation. Hence one can opine that at best, a well-executed prank is

noted but fails to spark discussions. Echoing the same consumer sentiments, this year Microsoft abstained from participating in this day of fooling around. As reported first by The Verge on March 27, 2019; in an internal memo, Microsoft chief of marketing Capossela explained that “data tells us these stunts have limited positive impact and can actually result in unwanted news cycles.” Speaking about consumer sentiments around getting fooled one cannot ignore instances where the pranks have had disastrous effects on people. Case in point among others would be, Google’s tyranny with gmail in the infamous mic drop April Fool act.

It added an obnoxious Despicable Me minion GIF to emails and then muted the thread. Users felt completely dejected by this tech trick. Some lost job opportunities as mail replies were affected by the prank. There were instances of misplaced emotions as well. Google apologized later for the same. Consumers get engaged with a brand where they over time anthropomorphize them as relationship gets stronger. And for a trusted consumer to get tricked by the brand does not make him or her feel good.

While driving down to work this April Fool’s Day, I heard this prank played by an FM radio station where the RJ engaged a listener to participate in a quiz. Every right question offered a monetary reward. On the third question the participant made a mistake but was still excited about the money earned through the first two questions. And at that point the RJ played an old Bollywood number that reminded him of the day. You could see him feeling so embarrassed through the radio waves!

Coming back to the Ola act this year. While speculations were rife about mobile restrooms it announced earlier, at a later point Ola declared a crowdfunding effort that will be running for six months to build toilets in the rural. But the enthusiastic urbanites does not seem to be impressed as evident from a LinkedIn reply to a post that mentioned the news – a diabetic initially feeling elated by the news of mobile restrooms concluded in a lamenting note, ‘ I speak for all Diabetics here when I say “when we really have to go...” is not a joke’. The point to note is the inevitable lure of poking some innocent fun that the day allows for all including brands and it would be difficult for them to bypass it. From an marketing ROI point of view let the straight faced bean counters too have a hearty laugh at least once every year. A bit of harmless fooling around is fun but let us stay away from being foolhardy.

The article can be read online [here](#).