

## **Unhinged and Unbothered: Duolingo's Viral Rise on TikTok**

### **Introduction**

Many companies choose a very traditional route when it comes to social media marketing. Some use influencer marketing, others do common ads. But, one company in particular stands out from the norm. The brand I chose to focus on is Duolingo, and the campaign I chose is their recent use of “unhinged marketing” within the past year. Duolingo is one of the most favored language-learning apps, targeting consumers who want to learn a language easily for little to no cost. Over the past year, Duolingo has taken TikTok by storm with its use of unhinged marketing strategies and relatable content. According to Hubspot, unhinged marketing is, “If you see a social media post and think ‘How did that get approved?’ it can likely be considered unhinged.” (Alfred, 2023). Duolingo has found great success using this campaign method, and Hubspot continues, “...has grown to nearly 7 million followers and accumulated over 147 million likes from various viral videos.” (Alfred, 2023). An unhinged green owl might not be the definition of success but for Duolingo, it's working. Duolingo has become one of the most popular companies on TikTok, simply for doing what no other company is daring to do with their content. Not only is Duolingo growing its consumer base and online following, but they're also paving the way for companies to use unhinged marketing on their social channels.

### **Overall Advertising/ IMC Strategy**

Identifying the target audiences and target market is the first step in marketing strategy. It's important to identify these variables before anything else, so the campaign can be as effective as possible. The book defines a target market as, “The market segment or group within the market segment toward which all marketing activities will be directed.” (Arens & Weigold, 2024, p. 663). Then proceeds to define the target audience as, “the specific group of individuals to whom the advertising message is directed.” For maximum effectiveness, marketers use segmentation and the marketing mix to allocate resources to specific target audiences and markets. To identify its target market, I believe Duolingo relied heavily on demographic and behavioral characteristics to decide what was fit for this campaign, as well as benefit segmentation.

Defined by the book, demographics are, “... sex, age, ethnicity, education, occupation, income, and other quantifiable factors,” (Arens & Weigold, 2024, p. 191). At the surface level, Duolingo wants to target users who are looking to learn a new language using their product. But, at a deeper level, I think the company wanted to create a connection between Duolingo and a younger audience. Duolingo saw how much power younger generations have on social networks, and wanted to leverage it to their advantage. Behavioristic segmentation is observing consumer purchasing patterns and grouping markets that have similar behaviors (Arens & Weigold, 2024). More specifically, I believe Duolingo looked a lot at user status to help determine a younger target audience. Since it is a free app, increasing initial downloads is the first step. Then, by creating consistent content on social media, they can remind their users to keep using the app. After that, they can target in-app purchases to their consistent users. It's very easy to be

influenced by social media in this day and age, but I think Duolingo uses it to its advantage. But consistently being present in their consumers' social media feeds, strengthens the relationship between the consumer and the brand. It expands the relationship outside of just the Duolingo app and brings it into the consumer's entertainment desires as well. In regards to benefit segmentation, Duolingo had to take into account the benefits sought by consumers, and how they can include it in their content. Customers of Duolingo are looking to use the app for its function (learning a new language), but Duolingo is looking to expand the horizons of its content and have its audience additionally look to Duolingo for entertainment. According to the book, "In addition to tangible benefits, customers are often motivated by *symbolism*- what the brand name means to them, to associates, or to some social reference group." (Arens & Weigold, 2024, p. 67). Having the green Duolingo owl (also known as Duo) represents the brand aids with this.

To approach a younger audience, Duolingo uses the owl mascot to humanize the brand. It adds a consistent face throughout the content and makes the overall image of the company more light-hearted. Keeping the content and promotional materials more casual is also a strategy Duolingo uses. Duolingo approaches its marketing campaign with less professionalism than most companies, but it has helped them connect with their target audience tremendously.

### **Message Strategy**

After defining who the campaign is targeted towards, marketers need to decide how they're going to get their message across. As mentioned before, Duolingo has rebranded to be known for its unhinged marketing across its social platforms. Instead of being focused on pushing their product, Duolingo shifted to be more concerned with consumer entertainment. Rather than trying to sell consumers their product at first click, Duolingo became more concerned with being remembered. This resonated especially well with younger audiences. To keep consistent with this message strategy, it was important for the Duolingo marketing team to stay on the trends. Hopping on trending topics such as upcoming movies, celebrity drama, and more helped Duolingo's relevance in the pop-culture world, and keep its content interesting to its viewers. Hubspot says this, "...illustrates how the brand can hop on a then-trending topic while reminding the audience that it is still a language-learning app," (Alfred, 2023). The main (and most impressive) element of Duolingo's unhinged social media campaign is the fact they can draw from current events and still relate them to their product.

Another element of Duolingo's message strategy is the storylines they create within their content. To keep their audience and consumers coming back, Duolingo has created multiple storylines in their videos. One example is a narrative where the Duolingo owl has a rivalry with Google Translate. Not only is this comedic, but it's a creative way to incorporate the product into their unhinged marketing campaign. They are still engaging their audience, but it is also encouraging consumers to download Duolingo instead of using a rival product (Google Translate). Another example is a running joke with the Duolingo legal team. Duolingo realizes its content is following an unhinged campaign, and it chose to break the fourth wall by creating content surrounding the topic. Many videos include discussions with the Duolingo legal team.

Hubspot says, "... another running joke on the TikTok account that highlights Duolingo's counsel trying to stop Duo from posting (a nod to the unhinged nature of the content)." (Alfred, 2023). Breaking this fourth wall lets the audience feel as if they are in on the joke, and further deepens the connection between consumer and marketer.

### **Media/Channel Strategy**

The channel where Duolingo has decided to push its campaign may have been the most important decision thus far. Using social media (specifically TikTok) is what has led to Duolingo's success in its unhinged marketing campaign. The nature of short-form videos and the popularity of social media apps make it easier for a campaign to go viral than other platforms. Since Duolingo also wanted to reach a younger audience, social media was the place to go. Duolingo listened to consumers and made content based on audience engagement, which only strengthened the campaign. The American Marketing Association says, "The company's marketing strategy has been based on user engagement on social media sites." (Pinto, 2023). Having a company adhere to consumers' desires and be willing to be unhinged is what helped Duolingo's campaign go viral. Once their campaign started gaining traction, there was no looking back. Hubspot says, "It's not all memes and funny videos — the marketing strategy has provided an ROI for the company. Duolingo's daily active users are up 62% from last year and it continues to be among the top-downloaded Education apps." (Alfred, 2023). Since finding success on TikTok, Duolingo has gone to expand its brand to both Instagram and Twitter, which have been successful. Posting consistently on all of Duolingo's platforms has also aided their success. Another reason for choosing social media as the main channel for the unhinged marketing campaign is that generally, casual and funny content tends to perform better on social media platforms versus traditional channels. Younger audiences enjoy seeing companies go outside the box on social media. It breaks down the wall between company and consumer, and it stands out to be doing something out of the ordinary.

### **Conclusion**

Though unhinged marketing may come off as unprofessional, Duolingo has proven its effectiveness. Relating to younger audiences sometimes requires thinking outside of the box. Putting a company's image on the line can be a risky move depending on the product. But, in the current dynamic era of modern marketing, attention spans are short, and risks are sometimes necessary to reach your target audience. Relating to younger demographics means listening to what the consumer wants, which is usually different from traditional marketing campaigns. Duolingo's approach highlights the importance of staying up-to-date with trends and adapting to consumer preferences. Overall, the brand has shown that being unhinged is something to embrace, and professional ads aren't always the way to go. Duolingo has proven that with consistency and the willingness to get a little silly, unhinged marketing is not only effective but also lucrative.

## Works Cited

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