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AT&T's It Can Wait Campaign

Organizational Analysis

AT&T is an American telecommunications company and conglomerate headquartered in Dallas, Texas with John T. Stankey as the current CEO. It was established in 1876 after Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone and began as the "Bell Telephone Company." From the late 1800s into the late 1900s, the company grew into a monopoly which subsequently led to its split in 1984 after facing a series of antitrust lawsuits between 1974 and 1982. In 2005, SBC Communications, a former part of the conglomerate, acquired AT&T for \$16 billion and adopted its present-day name. AT&T provides high-speed fiber and wireless broadband services and equipment, as well as entertainment services through platforms such as HBO Max and AT&T TV. The company's vision is to provide customers with high-speed connectivity, software-based entertainment, and tailored premium content and advertising. Core values include living true, thinking big, pursuing excellence, inspiring imagination, being there, standing for equality, embracing freedom, and making a difference.

As the largest telecommunications company in the world, AT&T has many financial resources, connections, and international recognition. Being a well-established company gives it the advantage and strength of garnering attention and support to its campaign. The campaign also promotes relevant messages in the current digital age people live in, which allows individuals to relate to the company's mission. Additionally, AT&T is building their brand value through other CSR initiatives, such as helping the environment, volunteering in communities, and educational efforts. Consequently, the company is strengthening their corporate image by giving back to communities and launching their "It Can Wait" campaign to educate people about the fatal consequences of texting and driving, which can also be seen as a CSR effort. However, after acquiring the media company Time Warner and experiencing a decline in its customer base and revenues, AT&T has accumulated a large debt of around \$170 billion. This may hinder the company's efforts throughout their campaign in relation to financial funding. However, there are still opportunities for AT&T to succeed in their campaign. With increased usage of mobile devices in the digital age, greater attention will be drawn to the issue as the campaign addresses a prominent problem. In addition, the company does not have a limitation on its target audiences as different age groups utilize mobile devices. With more advanced forms of technology, AT&T also has more innovative ways to promote their messages besides traditional media; they have other options of utilizing social media, experiential activations, and merchandise to promote their campaign. However, some threats that the company faces are possible competition from other industries on safe driving, such as the automobile and alcohol industry, and the fact that the campaign may lose momentum due to the lack of long-term interest and investment from their audiences.

Situational Overview

In the early 2000s, the technological development of mobile devices increased rapidly. While many adults and teens enjoyed the perks of using new features on cell phones, no one predicted the underlying issue of texting while driving. Many drivers believe they are able to text and drive safely, or even simply glance at their phones for a brief moment without endangering themselves or other passengers. However, according to a 2010 study published by the University of North Texas Health Science Center, there were over 16,000 fatalities in the United States from the years 2001 to 2007 that were caused by texting while driving. Based on studies focused on texting-and-driving-related accidents, AT&T made it their mission to reduce the number of these instances; as the largest telecommunications company in the world, they felt it was their responsibility to educate people about the dangers of texting and driving. Consequently, the company launched their “It Can Wait” campaign in 2010.

Insights and Analysis

When AT&T first launched their campaign, they conducted their own research and surveyed teenage drivers to gather information about their attitudes and beliefs about texting and driving. Based on the survey, 75% of respondents reported that they found it common to text when driving.

However, five years after the campaign’s initial launch, AT&T decided to shift the focus of the campaign after experiencing stagnant results. According to another report published in 2015 by the National Safety Council, cell-phone related crashes had increased for the past three consecutive years and accounted for 27% of all crashes. In other words, early efforts to reduce texting and driving did not meet the company’s expectations or goals. As a result, AT&T commissioned a primary research study that was conducted by Braun Research; 2,067 people in the United States aged 16 to 65 who used their smartphone and drove at least once a day were surveyed. Based on the collected data, the majority of respondents reported that they text and drive; others reported emailing, using social media, taking photos or videos, and surfing the internet while driving. A key insight that AT&T gained during their research process was that smartphones were evolving in terms of their variety of uses and functionality; texting was no longer the only activity individuals were doing while driving. Consequently, due to the fact that many individuals often used social media while driving, and that teenagers were no longer the only age demographic to utilize smartphones behind the wheel, the campaign included social media aspects as part of the main issue and began targeting people of different age groups in order for the message to resonate with everyone. Therefore, these key takeaways from the middle point of the campaign allowed AT&T to evaluate, analyze, and restructure the focus of their mission.

Planning

The strategy was to transform the outdated and exclusive campaign message into a new, engaging, and inclusive one that would include several underlying messages tailored to more target audiences. AT&T essentially wanted its audiences to be able to visualize the impacts of distracted driving while being able to engage in some way with the content. Although the primary audience initially included teenager drivers since they used technology the most, the company decided to expand their primary audience to all phone users in general upon realizing that distracted driving was an issue that affected adults as well. In the second half of the campaign, the secondary audience included the family members of the victims of distracted

driving once the underlying repercussions of dangerous driving habits were realized. For the key messages, the company continued to utilize their main message from the beginning of their campaign, which was “Don’t text and drive.” In addition, they added other slogans that appeared in their advertisements, such as “Eyes on the road, not on your phone,” “No text or post is worth a life, it can wait,” and “You are never alone on the road.” Another essential underlying message conveyed that accidents not only affect the victims but their families as well. The central goals of the campaign included:

1. To put an end to distracted driving (behavioral goal)
2. To educate people about the dangers of distracted driving (awareness goal)

To narrow down on the essential campaign goals, AT&T identified two main objectives, which were:

1. To reduce the number of automobile crashes caused by distracted driving (behavioral objective)
2. To increase audience awareness and change attitudes through content views and engagement to show that distracted driving is as dangerous as drinking and driving (awareness and attitudinal objective)

Execution

In March of 2010, AT&T officially launched its “It Can Wait” campaign to raise awareness of the dangers of texting while driving. Although it initially focused on the company’s employees and retail stores, it quickly became a mass advertising campaign and included print, radio, television, and online advertisements. AT&T began their mission with the creation of The Pledge, which was displayed on their official website as a simple commitment to never text and drive. Drivers were encouraged to sign up and participate in the pledge by clicking on the “Pledge Now” button on the website, and even share a screenshot of their pledge on other social media platforms with the hashtag #ItCanWait. In addition, AT&T utilized celebrity endorsements from musicians such as Demi Lovato, Tim McGraw, and American Idols to promote the pledge. They appeared in short advertisements to share their stories and reasons for taking the pledge. Therefore, the pledge tactic essentially served as an awareness effort to spread the campaign’s key messages. To increase company and employee advocacy, AT&T utilized integrated messaging in their catalogs, signages, bills, emails and newsletters, and at their sponsored events. At their retail stores, the company incorporated don’t-text-and-drive messages on the protective clings on devices sold. The wireless and motor vehicle policies were also revised to prohibit texting and driving. In 2013, AT&T partnered with film director Werner Herzog to create a documentary featuring families that were affected by texting while driving. The documentary included both victims and distracted drivers themselves involved in accidents. After production, the documentary was distributed to over 40,000 high schools in the United States, as well as government officials, safety organizations, and the public as an educational awareness effort. In addition to the documentary, other television advertisement spots were produced and primarily targeted teenage drivers. AT&T also created their own free mobile application called DriveMode for smartphone customers to curb texting and driving. The application allows users to silence incoming alerts from text messages and calls to avoid distractions while driving. The application includes a feature that allows users to send customizable auto-reply messages to let other receivers know when one is driving. Additionally, AT&T developed their own online simulator to show the firsthand dangers of texting and driving; the company toured a texting and driving simulator chair to high schools during events across the United States as well.

As part of their later efforts, AT&T increased the support of their campaign by partnering with 1,500 other major companies related to the automobile industry, such as USAA, Goodyear Tires, and the FCC. Additionally, in 2015, the company released another film showing a mother behind the wheel who became distracted by the number of likes and comments on a social media post she uploaded. The following year, AT&T launched another film featuring a father who mistakenly took his eyes off the road for a brief moment which led to a fatal outcome. Instead of solely using teenage drivers, AT&T decided to include different target audiences by utilizing adult figures as well. To target their secondary audience through emotional appeals, the company created numerous short films and television advertisements featuring the families of distracted drivers to show the importance of considering the potential impact on loved ones and other passengers in the vehicle. While AT&T included more people in their target audiences, they did not ignore their original public of teenagers; in 2019, AT&T partnered with Project Yellow Light, a scholarship competition, to reward students who created the best PSA for distracted driving. This effort offered a cash scholarship and prize to motivate young individuals to spread awareness about the dangers of distracted driving. This partnership is beneficial because offering a prize increases the number of participants and produces a better result. More recently, in 2020, AT&T created a virtual reality experience on their website to allow people to visualize the terrifying yet realistic outcomes of distracted driving; the physical impacts and damages of accidents are emphasized and use fear tactics to notify audiences. This simulation is the closest an audience can get to experiencing what distracted driving really feels like, as it puts you in the driver's seat and deploys multiple distractions.

Evaluation

While AT&T did not propose specific time or execution metrics to measure the success of the campaign, we have concluded that audience engagement with the content produced by the company is one way to measure the goals and objectives. For example, the number of views on the videos posted on AT&T's YouTube channel convey the attention levels of the audience.

Within the two-year time period from when some of the videos were posted on the channel:

- The "Until Then" television advertisement garnered 23,579 views
- The 360 Virtual Reality Experience gained 35,398 views
- "The Face of Distracted Driving: Caleb's Story" film gathered 47,201 views

In addition, we can measure the level of success in achieving the awareness and attitudinal goals through the audience engagement from the number of people who took the pledge: to this date, just over 40 million people have taken the pledge on AT&T's website, indicating that many people have become aware of their campaign messages. The campaign achieved its goals and objectives of spreading its messages to its target audiences based on the number of views.

Although the campaign did not go viral, thousands of people viewed and engaged with the content. However, based on statistics, almost 9/10 people admit to still using their phones while driving; consequently, the behavioral goal and objective of AT&T was not met. Additionally, although there are currently 40.3 million pledges recorded on the company's website, numbers from the US Department of Transportation still show that deaths from distracted driving only decreased by 2.2% in recent years, indicating that AT&T's ultimate goal of putting an end to distracted driving was not successful. This suggests that the campaign as a whole wasn't entirely successful due to its lack of achievement in changing the public's behavior.

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