

The Good, Bad, and Ugly Side of Entrepreneurial Marketing: Is Your Social Media Campaign Unveiled, Incognito, or Exposed?

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Abstract

Traditional marketing media have been losing their effectiveness and digital marketing spend is on the rise. The author discusses and demarcates incognito, exposed, and unveiled social media campaigns that marketers have been utilizing in order to improve ROI, and illustrates the increasing prevalence of these unconventional approaches. A typology is presented and the managerial implications of entrepreneurial social media marketing campaigns are explored.

Introduction

In the biggest art theft in Swiss history, four paintings by Degas, Van Gogh, Monet, and Cézanne worth \$165M were stolen by three masked thieves from a museum in Zurich. Two of the paintings were recovered from the back seat of a stolen car two weeks later. However, the most valuable of the bunch, “the boy with the red vest” by Cezanne valued at over \$90M remained missing. The police admitted to having no leads until a mysterious YouTube video appeared. In the short clip, two masked men were viewed hanging “the boy with the red vest” on a wall. The video immediately went viral. Numerous bloggers and journalists speculated on the intent of the thieves posting the video. At the height of intrigue, the mystery was finally revealed in the top circulated newspaper of Switzerland. The masked men were simply two advertisers promoting a poster shop that sells genuine-looking replicas of famous paintings! The unveiling generated even more buzz and media attention. The duo effectively reached an audience of millions at negligible cost making the

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poster shop the most recognized store in its category. The campaign was recognized with multiple awards.¹

Marketing can be covert as well as overt. There is an abundance of literature on overt marketing with a relatively recent focus on calculating ROI, even at the activity-specific level. The problem is that these analyses increasingly show that the effectiveness of both overt marketing and traditional media has been steadily decreasing.^{2,3,4} An adult in the US receives about 41 pounds of junk mail (560 pieces) annually, 44 percent of which goes to the landfill unopened.⁵ Some 78 percent of the 210 billion emails sent daily is considered spam.⁶ Experiencing the promotional equivalent of bombardment, consumers seek refuge, tune out, or even worse they become resentful of marketers and their messages. Facing diminishing returns, P&G has been looking to cut one billion dollars out of its traditional marketing budget.⁷

In stark contrast, covert marketing (CM) especially when combined with social media promises tremendous returns but there is a dearth of literature on it. An increasing portion of marketing budgets is being steered to this presumably more effective type of marketing but there is no general definition nor accepted guidelines for it. The *American Marketing Association* has yet to provide a definition for covert marketing, masked marketing, or stealth marketing, which are often interchangeably used, in its online dictionary of marketing. By its very nature, one may not even recognize CM when one sees it.

Despite its exploding influence in marketing practice, we are still unclear as to what qualifies as CM, its effective boundaries, nor do we understand its impact and potential side effects as a marketing activity. This is one area where the scholarly thinking is sorely lagging behind practice. Is CM the future of social media marketing? Or is it nothing but deceptive practices that give consumers anxiety and marketers a bad name? Is it virtue for marketing or vice? In this article, I provide a definition for CM, present a typology to distinguish among its three forms, and make the case that it is an effective and much more prevalent social media marketing phenomenon than commonly thought.

Definition and Types of Covert Marketing

Outcomes of covert marketing tend to vary from wildly successful to consumer outrage, (not to be confused with deceptive marketing whose outcomes tend to range from mildly annoying to highly criminal). Most scholars seem to agree that *covert marketing is a disguised promotional activity that is not immediately recognized as commercial.*⁸ The fact that the

activity is not recognized as commercial makes it more interesting, trustworthy, actionable, and helps it break through traditional marketing clutter. Hence, as a form of entrepreneurial marketing, covert marketing can be very effective yet cost-efficient.⁹

CM is different from traditional marketing in the sense that marketers delay revealing (and sometimes intentionally not disclose or keep vague) the commercial nature of the activity to influence the attention, awareness, attitude, intention, purchase decision, or loyalty of the consumers. Such influence can be subtle (brand image improvement) as well as imply significant changes to the perceived value proposition. CM's success and very existence relies on the recipients' (initial) awareness of the commercial activity, or lack thereof. Next, I discuss three different categories of CM and provide examples.

The Bad: Incognito Marketing

Consumers are skeptical of commercial messages. In contrast, CM campaigns where the promotional activity is never identified (incognito marketing) can be very effective, yet they are ethically and legally in question. For example, consumers have come to expect product placements in movies, reality TV shows or even computer games but they may not suspect that McDonalds pays hip-hop artists "\$5 a play for any song that uses the word Big Mac" when they hear these songs.¹⁰ What if a branch of the government engaged in incognito antidrug marketing in sitcoms and dramas? We face the age-old ethical dilemma: would intentions then justify the means? "The government reviewed scripts in about fifty cases and placed promotional messages in more than one hundred episodes of popular shows like *ER* and *The Practice*—a sacrifice of editorial control worth about \$21 million to the networks."¹¹

Incognito marketing (also referred to as astroturfing) may go entirely undetected even by alert consumers. For example, one New York advertising agency paid the doormen of upscale Manhattan apartments to feature boxes from a retailer (with visible logos) in the lobbies to trick the residents/visitors into thinking that residents make big price tag purchases from that retailer on an ongoing basis, and another agency in San Francisco paid valet attendants of popular clubs and restaurants to feature Volvo cars prominently at the entrance to enhance the perceived image of the brand.¹² Incognito marketing efforts have been around since marketers bid on their own items during open English auctions or hired fake patrons to applaud and cheer "bravo!" at the end of Italian operas but have progressively taken to social media recently (see exposed marketing).^{13,14} Even at Yelp.com, which is considered among the most aggressive of the social media platforms in

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dealing with fake reviews, 16% of the reviews have been estimated to be fake using Yelp's proprietary algorithmic indicator.¹⁵ Of course, there is no reason to believe that this 16% is overstated or uniformly distributed. They can easily make the majority of reviews of a particular restaurant faking its own reviews. Meanwhile, it has been estimated that a star increase in Yelp reviews can boost sales by as much as nine percent.¹⁶

It is easier than ever for a celebrity to name-drop a favorite (sponsored) brand and reach millions of followers through Twitter. How can we be sure that the satirical YouTube user video or blog reviewing the latest gadget was indeed not sponsored by a chief competitor? Online reviews, genuine or not, can be tremendously influential either way. One such video (69M views and counting) suggested that Apple's new iPhones bend easily and arguably led to a 4.7% drop in the stock of the most valuable company in the world.¹⁷ Although not meant to promote the stock by any means, a negative tweet by Trump about Nordstrom was linked to its stock soaring by 7%.¹⁸

Even more worrisome is when public relations or government agencies use social media astroturfing to shape public opinion domestically as well as internationally, giving new meaning to the term covert operation, and further broadening the domain of incognito marketing.^{19,20,21}

The Ugly: Exposed marketing

No matter how effective, engaging in incognito marketing is akin to playing with fire. If CM cover is blown and exposed unintentionally then the marketers not only face ethical/legal ramifications but also significant consumer backlash. IBM had to pay six-digit fines when it paid to spray-paint hearts, peace signs and penguins on the sidewalks in Boston, Chicago, New York, and San Francisco to promote the Linux Operating system. What was incognito advertising to IBM was apparently unlawful graffiti to officials. Sony had to fire two executives, and its reputation in the movie industry was tarnished after it was discovered that it used fictitious movie critics to praise its own new releases.²² Samsung has been found guilty in Taiwan for hiring students to praise its own products and bash those of HTC and other competitors online.^{23,24}

When the New York's Attorney General set up a fake business, they were able to determine that "search engine optimization (SEO) firms routinely offered fake reviews as part of their services" and fined 19 firms (including dentists, lawyers, and an ultra-sound clinic who were clients).²⁵ Yet, an army of buzz makers for hire spread comments/reviews on social media and continue to influence consumers on a daily basis, globally.^{26,27}

The Good: Unveiled marketing

There has to be a better way to harness the power of CM and there is. In fact, the cases of entrepreneurial marketing where the marketing activity is unveiled as a surprise after garnering and sustaining attention are particularly effective, appreciated and at times celebrated by the audience. For example, in “the boy with the red vest” opening example, the social media CM campaign was revealed with good timing, and helped the poster shop (as well as their advertisers) realize very favorable outcomes. And these campaigns are exponentially more impactful if they are designed to be amplified by social and even traditional media. Consider the following campaign:

Over a thousand Italian soccer fans were duped into attending a fake poetry and classical music event by their girlfriends, bosses, and professors, sacrificing viewing the broadcast of the Champions League game between AC Milan and Spanish powerhouse Real Madrid. The auditorium was full the night of the game and the event kicked off on time. However, after 15 minutes of gloomy music, the tune eased into the Champions League anthem in a surprising twist, and the slide show (in Italian) came to climax with “how could you even have thought of missing the big match?... Let’s enjoy the match together.” Applause roared in the auditorium as the game broadcast was projected on the big screen, of course sponsored by Heineken! Unbeknownst to the victims, the prank was also broadcast on TV for other fans’ amusement. Over 1.5M reportedly saw them live, another 10M viewers learned about the Heineken campaign the next day, and the web site of the event alone had over 5 million unique visitors during the next two weeks, not to mention additional positive WOM effect through blogs, forums, and social media. Despite the scale and coordination the effort required, this unveiled marketing campaign was very cost effective for Heineken.²⁸

Now that I have hopefully established that unveiled marketing is the proper form of covert entrepreneurial marketing, I would like to qualify it further by discussing three relevant issues:

1. *When should covert marketing be unveiled?* Reveal the campaign too soon and the attention and impact will fizzle. Reveal it too late and you may find yourself in trouble:

Cartoon Network of Turner Broadcasting System came under scrutiny in Boston because of the “battery powered cartoon advertising signs” that it had covertly installed in heavy traffic areas as part of its ten city campaign. When Boston residents and police mistook the signs for bombs, bridges, the subway, and boat traffic on the Charles River was shut down, bomb squads were dispatched, and the city came to a halt. Congressman Markey characterized it as an “appalling publicity stunt” and “marketing run amok,” and joined the

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Massachusetts Attorney General, and the Mayor of Boston in publicly criticizing the network for not revealing the nature and location of the signs earlier to prevent a crisis. The network apologized for the blunder, however the damage was done: two people responsible for the Boston “hoax device” installations were arrested, the network was fined \$2 million, and general manager and executive vice president of the network resigned. Fortunately for Turner, the signs caused an epidemic in only Boston and in none of the other ten major cities subject to the campaign.²⁹

It is also not hard to imagine that even the award-winning advertisers of “the boy with the red vest” could have gotten in trouble if they had held on to their secret too long. The challenge is when is too soon and when is too late? I recommend focus groups, private screenings, and other forms experimentation to pre-test unveiled marketing campaigns. Studying and anticipating consumer response in order to determine the optimal timing for unveiling the marketing activity should become the hallmark of a successful covert marketing campaign.

2. *What is the choice of media for the unveiling?* Do we trick and unveil within the same platform? Or should we unveil in a different platform to amplify the impact? A classic of this variant is to use hidden cameras to record unsuspecting victims and then post their reactions on social media e.g., Jeff Gordon’s acrobatic test drive at a dealership (Pepsi, over 43M views and counting), display of telekinetic powers at a coffeehouse (Carrie the movie, over 67M views and counting). Traditional media usually picks up on the best (and worst) of social media but one can also design a social media CM campaign so that it becomes even more effective due to traditional media coverage.

3. *Is the product/brand integrated to the storyline?* The message gets more powerful if the campaign demonstrates specific product/service features. For example, LG made one of its large screen 4K televisions to look like the window of an interview room. The resulting YouTube video shows multiple interviewees’ reactions to an asteroid suddenly crashing on the city and causing Armageddon on the screen (over 20M views and counting; a variant with an elevator floor seemingly falling apart has over 37M views and counting).³⁰ Similarly, the “boy with the red vest” campaign video demonstrated product features (genuine looking posters) and the brand was revealed later.

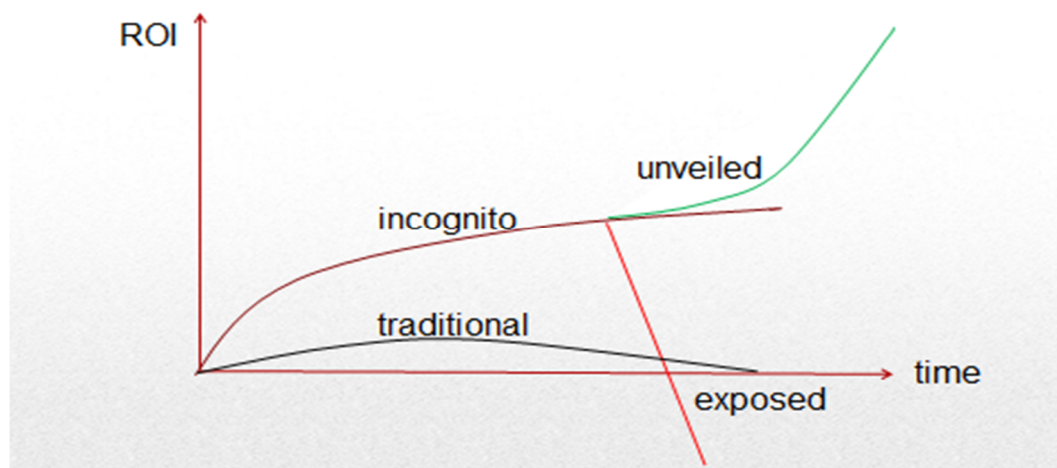
In still other cases, the product integration can be entirely missing but instead it is unveiled that the focal brand is simply sponsoring something that is exciting or enticing and worth sharing over social media. For example, in order to celebrate its 130th anniversary, Banco Sabadell sponsored a full

orchestra to play what first appeared to be an impromptu concert in Plaza Sant Roc, Barcelona (over 74M views and counting).³¹

It has been suggested that campaigns that cleverly utilize social media even the playing field between the start-ups with miniscule budgets and large corporations.³² Unveiled marketing, sophisticated or simple alike, engages and amuses consumers. These campaigns are increasingly effective because their WOM effect is exponentially amplified over social media and can reach millions of others in relevant social networks within days, even hours. In effect, the campaign is simultaneously co-created, appraised, and spread by consumers.

Good, bad, and ugly pathways for covert entrepreneurial marketing are illustrated in Figure 1. *The Bad*: CM that is never revealed remains *incognito marketing*. Here marketers influence consumer behavior with little or no immediate negative consequences and can also generate ROI that is significantly higher than that from traditional marketing. *The Ugly*: However, if they are caught in the act or discovered later (*exposed covert marketing*), they can face litigation as well as significant consumer backlash that threatens accumulated return.^{33,34,35} *The Good*: Finally, CM whose commercial nature is intentionally deferred to reveal later is *unveiled marketing* which tends to be effective and appreciated by most consumers. Unveiled marketing can quickly go viral and generate even higher returns upon the unveiling due to its surprise and novelty element.

Figure 1. Alternative Pathways for Marketing ROI



Dark Side of Covert Marketing

The thought process of the social media astroturfers probably does *not* go like this: C-suite pressure to perform is mounting, traditional marketing media is not working any more, unveiled marketing requires

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experimentation and creativity so results are not guaranteed, thus let me bet my company and career on a social media incognito marketing play. However, the unfortunate trend is that many small and hungry agencies are not averse to taking ethical or even legal risks and increasingly lure clients into the dark side of entrepreneurial marketing. These third-party agents (pun intended) push the envelope further and they oversell the benefits and undersell the risks of incognito marketing. In still other cases, these agencies promise results without fully disclosing the incognito nature of some of their social media activities. They buy followers by the ten thousands, generate fake reviews of praise, disguise sponsored messages as word-of-mouth, and they even badmouth competitors.^{36,37,38,39} FTC resources are too limited to monitor incognito marketing activity by these nimble agents. On the other hand, hiring these independent agents does not relieve the accomplice firms of the ethical and legal ramifications. Incognito marketing campaigns may work well but every one of them is a time bomb waiting to explode and expose their covert sponsors (cached traces of online campaigns can endure and haunt). Even worse, covert marketing when unintentionally exposed almost always hurts the image of marketing so the collective collateral damage is permanent. In summary, incognito marketers (on social media or elsewhere) are doing disservice to the profession of marketing.

Conclusion

I have attempted to demonstrate that CM is a commonly used entrepreneurial marketing technique and provided a definition and typology for it. Targeted CM campaigns can be conducted very cost-efficiently especially on social media. More research is needed to understand how prevalent incognito marketing is, in developed as well as developing economies where legal remedies may be lacking further. Acts of marketing where a reasonable consumer is not aware that marketing is taking place should be self-censored by the marketing profession as opposed to being praised as clever gimmicks. Many cases of CM remain legal but not necessarily ethical.^{40,41} In the case of deceptive marketing, most consumers eventually realize that they were "duped."^{42,43,44} CM's novelty mainly exists due to a lack of awareness by those exposed to it, consumers may never realize it, thus cannot ever complain to the FTC or consumer advocacy groups about it.

CM is arguably very effective and continues to generate positive outcomes for businesses. Furthermore, it is not only the marketer that is the beneficiary, consumers appreciate the novelty and unique experience provided by unveiled marketing as well.⁴⁵ It should be no surprise that consumers actually enjoy being catered to with creative marketing

campaigns. The next logical step should be through *unveiled* CM where *mindful* marketers realize that it is in their best self-interest not to engage in incognito campaigns.^{46,47}

With the possible exception of the Internet, every media has its own censors and gate-keepers (i.e., standards of professionalism and associations). Social media marketers should voluntarily establish their own standard of conduct regarding CM rather than one of government's choosing and imposing. This option demands that all marketers large and small take a critical look in their own practices. At the very least, it would ensure prevailing in potential litigation. At most, it might not only help the bottomline but also enhance consumer welfare and sentiment towards marketing. Meanwhile, marketers will continue to perfect the use of social media to improve marketing ROI. After all, we are still in the gold rush phase of entrepreneurial social media marketing and there are many gems of campaigns to be uncovered.

Author

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