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Bon Appetit's Bad Taste

Bon Appetit's Crisis Explained

Bon Appetit (BA) is an established food and entertainment publication. It began to bloom in popularity amongst mainstream media on YouTube in the years 2016-2019. Unique videos of BA chefs were posted consistently, but the popularity and entertainment of BA came to a cease in June 2020.

A public relations crisis came to light when BA's (now former) editor-in-chief, Adam Rapoport had photos of him and his wife from 2004 in brownface resurfaced on the internet. Just a couple weeks before the photo resurfaced, BA made a statement on their Instagram, standing in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Their message stated, "You'll see us tackling more of the racial and political issues at the core of the food world" (Harris, Haasch, & Greenspan, 2021). These series of ironic events struck a chord with BA fans and contributors.

Sohla El-Waylly, a former assistant food editor, shared that she, along with other staffers of color, were featured in BA's videos as a token of diversity and were not fairly compensated in comparison to her white colleagues. After El-Waylly's statement, more BA contributors pledged to no longer be part of the BA's YouTube videos until El-Waylly and other Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) were properly compensated for their work. More BIPOC came forward sharing their experiences under BA (Severson, 2020).

As a result, Rapoport resigned from his position, many of the most popular BA chefs/video talent left the company, and various fans were left disappointed in Rapoport's and BA's actions. It created a larger discussion of systemic racism within corporate companies, especially ones like BA, where they often would show their pride in their diverse team of chefs and entertainers

Key Publics

The key publics of this crisis include BA fans, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) who work in the food and entertainment industry, and White people who work in the food and entertainment industry.

Media Coverage

BA received a great deal of media coverage during the peak of their crisis. Popular publications such as *The New York Times*, *NPR*, *Vox*, and *Insider* covered the timeline of events leading up to Rapoport's resignation. Their coverage mainly sided with El-Waylly and BIPOC who were being unjustly treated. As for social media coverage, over a dozen BA contributors stood in solidarity with El-Waylly and the other BIPOC professionals on their personal social channels. Popular YouTube personalities, such as Philip DeFranco and Jack Saint, covered the crisis, also siding with El-Waylly and BIPOC. BA was not being shown in a positive light in mainstream media and social media during the time of this crisis.

Bon Appetit's Response

In response to this crisis, Rapoport resigned from BA, and BA released a statement and apology. Their apology is posted on their website. It stated that they remained complicit in a culture that they disavow and that their mastheads had been white for far too long. It acknowledged that BA tokenized many BIPOC staffers and are going to accelerate their pay and career development. It states that their company is taking steps to learn and change. It addresses various steps to creating an inclusive and equitable space, while dismantling a toxic work environment for BIPOC. Their statement ends with, “This is just the start. We want to be transparent, accountable, and active as we begin to dismantle racism at our brands” (The Bon Appétit and Epicurious Staffs, 2020). BA also posted a scripted YouTube video on their channel with their new leadership executives who are all BIPOC chefs. This video had three executives talk about why they joined BA and what they have planned for the future of the company (Bon Appetit, 2020).

Bon Appetit’s Key Messages

The key messages that BA wanted to communicate to their publics is that they are learning more about diversity, equity, and inclusion internally. They wanted to highlight that they accept their mistakes and that they will work harder to create a safe space for BIPOC employees. They wanted to convey that they are making drastic changes to their leadership and hope to show that in content moving forward.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The strengths of BA's response lie in how they worded their public statement. The carefully crafted sentiment did a great job at addressing their mistakes in centering whiteness in the food and entertainment industry and mistreating their BIPOC employees. They did well in going through all the hoops of a good apology by acknowledging their wrongdoings, addressing the bigger picture of systemic racism, and stating their action plan for growing in the future.

The weaknesses of their response comes from their "comeback" video on YouTube. The PR crisis began in June 2020 and their YouTube video with new executives who are BIPOC was released in October 2020. The video itself felt ingenuine due to the lack of a direct apology and acknowledgement of the crisis that occurred a few months prior. Bon Appetit missed the mark on their YouTube response, greatly weakening the authenticity and personal connection they once evoked before the crisis occurred.

Recommendations for Bon Appetit

If I were a PR consultant, I would first recommend BA to figure out what channels they would like to prioritize when addressing their response to the crisis. I would suggest that they focus extra closely on their social media channels, especially YouTube, because that is where most of the communal buzz occurs and where most of their followers consume their content. I would recommend that they take their well-written statement on their website and have that translated into video form. I would also suggest that they take a longer break in between the time the crisis occurred and when they post their "comeback" video, so there is more time for them to strategize their future steps in terms of organizational values, hiring new executives, and reframing their old content. I would suggest that they wait at least six months to start

posting again, as this would show that they are genuinely growing from their mistakes rather than scrambling to hire more BIPOC to seem more politically correct.

I would assess the success of my stated recommendations by reading mainstream media stories, watching YouTube reactions to the crisis and response, and listening to social media takes from BA fans and the public. BA would know that the tactics I suggested worked because the mainstream media stories would be more neutral while covering the crisis. YouTube reactions would also be more neutral and social media analytics in relation to the BA channels would have more support and constructive criticism instead of negativity and hate.

PR Theory

BA utilized Image Restoration Theory. This theory is one of many crisis response strategies that is comprised of strategies companies and public figures use. Five general image restoration strategies include denial, evasion of responsibility, reducing offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification. BA used corrective action and mortification in their response to their crisis. They outlined that they are going to hire more BIPOC, bolster equity within their company, and highlight BIPOC's voices. They also admitted their responsibilities as a food and entertainment company and asked for forgiveness.

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