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5 MARKETING LESSONS FROM VICTORIA'S SECRET REBRAND

A recent Ad Age-Harris Poll found younger consumers are particularly receptive to the new branding



By [Adrienne Pasquarelli](#). Published on June 28, 2021.



Megan Rapinoe is a Victoria's Secret brand ambassador now. Credit: L Brands

When Victoria's Secret announced earlier this month that it was overhauling its brand image, few were surprised. The lingerie retailer has long been criticized for oversexualizing women's bodies in both marketing and executive statements, a strategy at odds with the growing movement toward women's empowerment and authenticity. A brand turnaround was both expected and necessary under new Chief Marketing Officer Martha Pease, who joined in December from Boston Consulting Group after consulting with the brand last year. Retail analysts applaud the bold move away from the Angels of the past to the formation of the more realistic "VS Collective," a group including soccer star Megan Rapinoe, actress Priyanka Chopra Jonas and body advocate Paloma Elsesser, who will appear in ads and other female-focused initiatives.

While it's too early for sales results, a recent poll from Ad Age-Harris Poll found that younger consumers have been particularly receptive to the new branding strategy.

Almost half of millennials, or 46%, said Victoria's Secret was outdated, but 52% of the group say they're more likely to shop at the retailer in light of the rebrand and new advocacy for women's empowerment.

Some shoppers have already tweeted their approval.

Not a huge fan of Victoria's Secret but I'm encouraged by their recent rebranding & inclusion of #LGBTQ soccer pro @MeganRapinoe if it means our LGBTQ daughters feel more seen and represented in mainstream culture.

— Staci Frenes (@stacifrenes) June 21, 2021

Other marketers looking to rebrand may want to take a page from Victoria's Secret's new playbook. Below, some lessons.

1. Change is possible

As the culture evolves, brands can evolve too. Experts say that the biggest mistake a marketer can make is keeping their brand the same. This is particularly true for a heritage brand like Victoria's Secret. While the retailer has decades of built-in loyalists, it also needs to change in order to attract younger consumers, many of whom are attracted to newer, more modern underwear brands such as Lively or ThirdLove that focus on popular issues like women's empowerment. American Eagle's Aerie brand has long been considered the poster child for body positivity, a strategy that has resonated with shoppers.

“Brands can evolve and become different over time,” says Tiffany Rolfe, global chief creative officer at R/GA, noting that a brand needs to look at itself through a people and culture lens. “The biggest mistake a brand makes is not changing, not understanding the context and the culture they're in.”

2. Don't wait too long

Before the recent overhaul, Victoria's Secret had faced criticism of being outdated with its ads and boys club internal culture. For example, former Chief Marketing Officer Ed Razek made disparaging remarks about plus-size trans models in 2018. He didn't exit the

brand until the next year, and it's taken two years since that time to develop the new branding. After public backlash from the media and consumers, Victoria's Secret finally unveiled its new roadmap this month. But experts say the timing was late—the brand should have been in front of the trends shaping culture, rather than a position of playing catch-up.

“They waited too long—they tried to hang on to their old identity, their old image,” says Denise Lee Yohn, a brand leadership expert. “This broader definition of sexiness, what it is to be a woman, what women value—they could have been much more a part of shaping that, but instead they're reacting.”

3. Look to others for guidance

Victoria's Secret is not the first to rebrand to be more in touch with today's culture. Four years ago, Carl Jr.'s and Hardees moved away from so-called “hot chick” advertising toward food-focused fare, a refresh that others like GoDaddy have also pursued in recent years in a response to consumer demands. Nearly 20 years ago, De Beers, the diamond seller, switched up its marketing messaging. To appeal to independent women who might want to buy rings for themselves, it pushed a “Right Hand Ring” campaign. The move was smart for tapping into women's empowerment and away from a traditional patriarchal situation not all consumers embraced, says Rolfe.

“Brands can get caught in coming at something from a brand lens—is this right for the brand?—that they forget what business they're in,” she says. “Are we about selling sexy underwear or about enabling women to feel beautiful?”

4. Go all in

The decision to swap out the Angels for authentic brand ambassadors like Rapinoe is a major one and speaks to Victoria's Secret's commitment to change. Brand experts say such a radical overhaul is the way to go, since the brand received significant attention for the shift from both media and consumers. And the bold moves were needed. The majority of female customers, or 72% of the female respondents to the Ad Age-Harris

Poll who were aware of criticism against the brand, agreed that Victoria's Secret's ads were overly sexual and superficial before its recent news. Experts applaud the retailer for not being hesitant about an overhaul by doing it installments, for example.

“This is a pretty significant shift for them—they're not dipping a toe in the water,” says Yohn. “They are going all-in with all of the different women comprising the collective and being very bold about it, which is what they need to do in order for the rebrand to have any effect.”

5. It's not just about the outside branding

In addition to its outward-facing branding, Victoria's Secret is also altering its internal structure as it spins off from parent L Brands. The retailer recently announced a new board of directors for the new standalone company that includes six women out of seven positions. The posts, in addition to the VS Collective, new CMO and new Chief Executive Martin Waters, who was promoted after leading the lingerie business, last fall, illustrate the brand's commitment to a turnaround that starts from within, says Yohn.

“It seems like it is as much of an organizational and cultural change within the company as it is a branding change,” she says. “[In contrast,] so many brands have realized the power of celebrity but have done it only in an image or surface way.”

Rolfe says that in the past before social media, there was a separation between what a brand did internally and what outsiders could see—that's no longer the case.

“Brands could portray through one lens but behind closed doors you didn't know who these brands were,” she says. That's no longer the case, and something Victoria's Secret appears to have taken into account with its overhaul. “There can't be a disconnect between what they say and what they do.”

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