Marketing Doctor

Marketing Check-up

Bud Light

As of March 26, 2024

Condition: Under treatment

How the top beer lost its crown

For more than two decades, Bud Light was the top-selling beer in U.S. stores. In April 2023 one sponsored Instagram post set off a boycott, and within weeks the brand had lost that spot to Modelo Especial. This check-up looks at the promotion, the company's response, how far sales fell and what the episode shows about brands that sell to everyone.

Key takeaways

- A sponsored Instagram post for a March Madness promotion on April 1, 2023 set off a boycott within days.
- The CEO's first statement came about two weeks later and did not explicitly address the partnership, so the brand lost support on both sides.
- Bud Light lost its place as the top-selling beer in U.S. stores to Modelo Especial in May 2023, and its sales were still about 30% below the prior year in January 2024.
- The company changed the brand's marketing leadership and went back to sports and humour, signing UFC and running a Super Bowl comedy spot in 2024.

Marketing health check

Area	Finding
Positioning	Blurred. A mass brand caught between audiences who wanted different things from it.
Crisis response	Slow. The first statement came about two weeks in and did not address the partnership.
Customer loyalty	Habit, not loyalty. Close substitutes sat on the same shelf.
Creative	Back to basics. Sports and humour from late 2023.
Market position	Lost the top spot to Modelo Especial in May 2023.

Timeline

When	What happened
Apr 1, 2023	Dylan Mulvaney posts a sponsored video for a Bud Light March Madness promotion.
Apr 4, 2023	Kid Rock posts a video firing a rifle at cases of Bud Light.
Apr 14, 2023	CEO Brendan Whitworth issues a statement that does not explicitly address the partnership.
Week of Apr 15	Bud Light sales are 17% below the same week of 2022.
May 2023	Modelo Especial outsells Bud Light, ending a run of more than two decades at the top.
Jul 2023	Anheuser-Busch announces about 350 layoffs.
Oct 2023	Bud Light signs a multiyear deal as UFC’s official beer partner.
Jan 2024	Weekly sales are still 29.9% below a year earlier.
Feb 2024	Super Bowl spot “Easy Night Out” with Post Malone, Peyton Manning and Dana White.

What happened: one post reached the whole market

On April 1, 2023, transgender influencer Dylan Mulvaney posted an Instagram video for a Bud Light March Madness promotion. The company had sent her a custom can with her face printed on it to mark the anniversary of her transition. Conservatives on social media called for a boycott, and three days later Kid Rock posted a video of himself firing a rifle at cases of Bud Light, NPR reported.

On April 14, Anheuser-Busch CEO Brendan Whitworth said, "We never intended to be part of a discussion that divides people." The statement did not explicitly address the partnership, NBC News reported. Transgender rights supporters then turned away from the brand too, saying the company did not do enough to support Mulvaney, the Associated Press reported. The response satisfied neither side.

The diagnosis: habit is not loyalty

- **A habit purchase with easy substitutes.** Light lager sits next to close alternatives on the same shelf, so switching cost buyers almost nothing.
- **A niche partnership on a mass brand.** A sponsored post on one influencer's account reached the whole market, including buyers the campaign was never meant for.
- **No plan for the reaction.** The first statement came about two weeks later and did not take a clear position, which let critics on both sides define the story.
- **Mistaking default for devotion.** A brand that has been number one for decades can mistake habit for loyalty, the same error teams make when they credit paid ads for branded searches that would have happened anyway.

The treatment: new leadership, back to sports and humour

- Bud Light's vice president of marketing was placed on leave and Todd Allen took over, CNN reported.
- In July 2023 Anheuser-Busch announced about 350 layoffs and invested to support its wholesalers.
- In October 2023 Bud Light signed a multiyear deal to become UFC's official beer partner in the U.S. from 2024.
- For the 2024 Super Bowl it ran a 60-second comedy spot, "Easy Night Out," with Post Malone, Peyton Manning and UFC CEO Dana White. "We wanted to get back to the humor the brand has been known for," Allen told CNN.

The result: the crown changed hands

In the week ending April 15, Bud Light's sales were 17% lower than a year earlier. In May, Modelo Especial outsold it, ending a run at the top that had lasted more than two decades. In the four weeks ending June 3, Bud Light's dollar sales were down 24.4%.

The loss stuck. Modelo Especial finished 2023 $240 million ahead of Bud Light in U.S. store sales, and in the week ending January 20, 2024, Bud Light's sales were still down 29.9%. Parent AB InBev said its U.S. sales to retailers fell 11.9% in 2023, "primarily due to the volume decline of Bud Light." Customers who switched to a close substitute did not have to come back.

Lessons for your marketing

1. Any brand that sells to a broad public will meet a moment when part of its audience objects. Decide before launch who speaks, how fast and what you will say.
2. Respond quickly and clearly. A vague statement two weeks late lets others tell your story.
3. Remember that a sponsored post reaches far beyond the account it runs on.
4. Test whether customers choose you or simply default to you. A yearly marketing audit is a good place to ask.
5. In a crisis, read sales weekly, not quarterly, so you know whether the treatment is working.

The doctor will see you now.

Book a free marketing check-up at marketingdoctor.ca/contact. We'll examine your marketing, show you what's holding growth back and prescribe what to fix first.

Sources

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