Marketing Doctor

Marketing Check-up

Duolingo

As of September 2, 2025

Condition: Healthy

The owl, the memo and the AI threat

Duolingo built one of the best-known mascots in consumer tech: Duo, the green owl who nags you about your streak. In 2025 it tested how far that goodwill stretches. A stunt that killed off Duo drew record attention. An AI-first memo drew a backlash. And free AI tools started to look like a substitute. Through it all, users and revenue grew about 40%. This check-up looks at what worked, what didn't and what to watch.

Key takeaways

- The February 2025 campaign that killed off Duo the owl drew 1.7 billion impressions in two weeks against a goal of 70 million, and it was built into the product: lessons brought him back.
- An April 2025 AI-first memo drew criticism online, and Duolingo deleted its TikTok and Instagram posts amid the backlash. The CEO later said: "This was on me. I did not give enough context."
- In August, Google added language practice to Translate. Duolingo now competes with free AI tools, not just other language apps.
- The business is healthy: daily active users rose 40% to 47.7 million in the second quarter of 2025, though growth is slowing from 51% six months earlier.

Marketing health check

Area	Finding
Mascot	Very strong. Duo drew 1.7 billion impressions in two weeks.
Messaging	Mixed. An AI-first memo clashed with the brand's character.
Growth	Strong but slowing. User growth fell from 51% to 40%.
Competition	New. Free AI language practice from Google.
Marketing and product	Tightly linked. Campaigns tied to lessons and streaks.

Timeline

When	What happened
Q4 2024	Daily active users grow 51%.
Feb 11, 2025	Duolingo announces that Duo the owl has died.
Feb 25, 2025	Duo returns after fans complete lessons to revive him.
Late Apr 2025	The CEO's AI-first memo is posted on LinkedIn.
May 2025	Duolingo deletes its TikTok and Instagram posts amid the backlash.
Q2 2025	Revenue rises 41% and daily active users rise 40% to 47.7 million.
Aug 2025	The CEO says of the memo: "This was on me."
Late Aug 2025	Google adds AI-powered language practice to Translate.

What happened: the owl, then the memo

Duo the owl is Duolingo's best-known distinctive brand asset. On February 11, 2025, the company announced that Duo was dead, a stunt that Ad Age reported set off a social media frenzy. Fans could bring him back by completing lessons, and he returned two weeks later. Fast Company reported 1.7 billion impressions in two weeks, against a goal of 70 million, and about 160,000 pieces of user-generated content. A spokesperson said it drove "a meaningful lift in new and resurrected users."

In late April, chief executive Luis von Ahn told staff that Duolingo would be AI-first and would "gradually stop using contractors to do work that AI can handle." The memo was also posted on LinkedIn. In May, Ad Age reported a wave of criticism and that Duolingo had deleted its TikTok and Instagram posts. In August von Ahn said, as Fortune reported: "This was on me. I did not give enough context."

The diagnosis: two stories that met

- **A brand built on character.** The owl stands for play and persistence. People follow Duolingo for its personality.
- **A message about cost.** The memo stood for automation. It spoke about cost and staffing to an audience that follows the brand for its character, a messaging mismatch.
- **Internal became external.** A memo posted publicly is a marketing message, whether it was written as one or not.
- **A new kind of rival.** Google's free AI practice in Translate asks a harder question: why pay for lessons at all? Fortune reported the announcement briefly hit Duolingo's shares.

The treatment we would prescribe

- Lead every AI announcement with what learners get, before any word about cost or staffing.
- Keep tying owl campaigns to lessons and streaks, so attention turns into habit and retention.
- Show the people behind the courses and the characters, so learners can see the human work that AI supports.
- State plainly what Duolingo gives that a free AI tool does not: structure, habit and fun. A sound competitor analysis now includes free AI tools.

The result: a healthy brand with a question to answer

The business numbers are strong. In the second quarter of 2025, revenue rose 41%, daily active users rose 40% to 47.7 million and paid subscribers rose 37% to 10.9 million. The company raised its full-year guidance.

The trend is worth watching: daily active user growth was 51% in the fourth quarter of 2024. The owl is still doing its job. The next task is answering why learners should pay for Duolingo when AI practice is free.

Lessons for your marketing

1. A loved mascot buys attention, not forgiveness.
2. Tie your biggest campaigns to the product, so attention becomes a habit.
3. Internal memos become public messages. Write them for customers too.
4. When new technology threatens your category, explain what it does for the customer before what it does for your costs.
5. Name your free rivals as clearly as your paid ones.

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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