

Reformation: *Shoes Suck* Campaign Analysis

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Background

Driven by hype, trends, and throwaway culture, the fashion industry isn't exactly known for its green credentials – at least not until the founding of Reformation, a revolutionary lifestyle brand with a mission to merge together fast fashion, sustainability, and local manufacturing. Founded in 2009 by Yael Aflalo – a fashion designer and former model –, Reformation is headquartered in Los Angeles and is home to the first sustainable sewing factory in the United States. Disgruntled by how much the fashion industry is set up for waste, Aflalo was inspired to create a brand with an ethos of wanting to avoid waste, dedicated to “transforming current harmful retail practices” (Reformation, 2021). From utilising local manufacturers to their deliberate use of recycled fabrics and eco-friendly packaging, the brand oversees and regulates all aspects of its production to ensure the sustainability of its supply chain, offering a line of thoughtfully produced vintage clothing that “celebrates the feminine figure for the confident and chic” (Reformation, 2021). With green measures infused into all aspects of the brand, the company’s branding statement is to “bring sustainable fashion to everyone” (Reformation, 2021). Aware of the misconception that sustainable fashion often undermines looks and aesthetics, without sacrificing the current trends, Reformation takes this as an opportunity to cater to women who value style in addition to ethical clothing, bridging the gap between environmental attitudes and sustainable purchasing behaviours (Perreault, 2019). Beginning in 2013, Reformation launched online, championing its mission worldwide. While online sales were slow to begin with, what had originally been a side project of Adlalo’s quickly drew in approximately 200k monthly visitors through its website and had brought in more than twenty-five million dollars in revenue by 2015. Now, with a cultish following of 301K likes on Facebook, 13.6K followers on

Twitter and a 1.7m Instagram audience, the brand is well known for its innovative, tech-driven approaches to sustainability (Reformation, 2021).

Currently, Reformation operates twenty-one stores globally. Having just launched its first international locations in 2019 in both Canada and London respectively, the company continues to grow its international presence with plans to expand to two more sites. Along this trajectory, Reformation has become a celebrity-loved fashion brand, frequently spotted on celebrities and influencers like Kaia Gerber, Emily Ratajkowski and Kendall Jenner, quickly growing in popularity. Unlike other brands who label themselves sustainable by describing themselves using eco-friendly buzzwords but shies away when it comes to providing details on the negative impacts their products have on the environment, Reformation brings these issues to the forefront of its concerns, educating its customers through digestible product descriptions on their homepage, explaining the origins of their fabrics and their impact on the environment.

Since its establishment, the brand's messaging has remained consistent. With catchy slogans such as "Lower your necklace, not your standards," "We make killer clothes that don't kill the environment," and "Being naked is the #1 most sustainable option. We're #2.", the brand is "paving the path for how the fashion industry defines green" – standing as the poster brand for sustainable apparel (Reformation, 2021). Beyond capturing the attention of the crowds, its recent acquisition by Permira Funds "signifies that investors are starting to see the value in sustainability and Instagram Savvy", thus inviting further explorations into Reformation's influential brand strength.

This paper will delve into Reformation's online marketing strategies, specifically investigating the "Shoes Suck" campaign launched in 2021 to shed light on how this brand articulates its values proposition through an ensemble of online and offline marketing strategies.

By initiating technology-infused retail experiences and effective brand storytelling, Reformation has succeeded in carving a distinct niche for itself, establishing itself as more than just a fashion label but as an (online) brand community where members share a common sense of moral responsibility for preserving the environment (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). This campaign analysis will be evaluated against the campaign scoreboard, followed by a brief customer analysis, and completed with a SWOT analysis to examine opportunities for improvements.

Building a Strong Brand Persona through Cause Marketing

Today, with the market saturated with competitors that provide similar product offerings, entities are struggling to stand out from one another. As such, a company's branded persona becomes ever more important, calling forth unique approaches to position oneself as an instantly recognisable and 'sticky' experience for its customers. According to Herskovitz and Crystal (2010), customer-brand relations are bounded by storylines that capture the essence of who the brand is. Given that "storytelling is essential to successful branding", the articulated form of the brand's persona must be prioritised above all. Such being the case, the way a brand portrays its branded persona must remain consistent so that customers are able to naturally connect and identify with a brand persona whose actions and words are well matched. Tied together by its clear mission statement and coordinated actions, Reformation manifests a strong brand persona through cause marketing, aiding the audiences' appreciation for this brand.

Defined as "the linking of a for-profit firm to a nonprofit cause for the purpose of furthering the for-profit's business strategy", cause marketing is a common marketing strategy employed to differentiate brands from their competitors (Gourville & Rangan, 2004; p.38). With cause marketing being Reformation's dominant marketing strategy, Reformation's unique

positioning at the intersection of fashion and sustainability allows the brand to effectively advertise itself as a positive alternative to its traditional retailer counterparts, portraying it as “a compassionate company that cares about the Earth and the environment” (Bai, 2018). To that end, the company’s core value proposition artfully works as one that can be easily emphasised with, appealing to a niche market of customers with a particular passion for environmental sustainability, which has proven to be a hugely successful strategy thus far. Although cause marketing has been traditionally initiated to drive the needs of the for-profit firm, Reformation diverges from this strategy, executing its branding efforts differently. Instead, Reformation’s initiated actions are not fiscally motivated, rather, it is much-publicised that they are authentically driven by Aflalo’s “desire to make a difference” having learnt through her first-hand experiences working in clothing factories the level of pollution and the destructive impacts the fashion production industry has on the environment, therefore aiding the company in building a reputable image for the brand (Kaplan, 2015). Due to its differentiated brand voice and innovative market approach, such strategies have indeed contributed to helping build a loyal following. What is more, by carrying a brand persona that exhibits relatable human traits of honesty and responsibility, Reformation's does well in driving the continuity for its overall brand message since consumers are more likely to become attached to brands they are able to relate to in human-like ways, helping “consumers develop, maintain and promote a desired identity”, fulfilling consumers’ sociality motivations of preserving the environment (MacInnis & Folkes, 2016; p.367).

Omnichannel Marketing: Success in Merging Online and Offline Marketing Strategies

Employing an omnichannel marketing approach, the brand's messages about social responsibility and sustainability are well communicated throughout the company's online platforms and physical stores, where Reformation prioritises a consistent and unified experience at every touchpoint. Sustaining their corporate responsibility, Reformation follows a strict production process which only allows them to use surplus materials and vintage garments to create its items, meaning each piece is limited. Hence, to ensure a satisfactory, yet unique customer shopping experience, the brand's technology-enabled retail concept of digital fitting rooms enables you to digitally add items, customising them to your sizes, colours and styles in your dressing room; blending together the brand's online and brick-and-mortar experiences in innovative ways that have never been seen before, better yet, corresponding well with its marketing efforts in reducing waste by utilising "the order data on the back end to track the number of store visitors and SKU performance, further improving its inventory management" (Lawren, 2017).

Tightly woven in with its tactical marketing strategies, online, the brand's message can be seen in the way the company extends its efforts to publish quarterly environmental progress reviews; publicising its recycling process to establish a clear statement towards consumers about their social responsibility awareness. Additionally, Reformation has also launched its own tools such as the RefScale in 2015 which allows the company to measure the environmental savings produced by each garment from fibre production to dyeing to shipping and garment care. The tool enabled customers to track their environmental savings when they make any purchase, tracking their own environmental savings with every Reformation purchase. To encourage consumers to be more conscious about the clothes they wear, the brand recently partnered up with thredUP to launch a resale program project called Ref Recycle that allows customers to earn

credit by sending old, used garments back to the company for recycling. Echoing its message, Reformation has even carefully crafted the names of its particular lines, like a ‘Low Carb Collection’ – a line especially curated for Earth Day of 2015 – “which showed the brand using the least amount of Carbon Dioxide yet in their garments” (.). Continuing such efforts in their marketing campaigns, in a 2019 campaign, “Carbon Is Canceled”, the company utilised “gift cards and discounts to encourage customers to show how they reduced their carbon footprints” (Rudolph, 2019). Such efforts work well in incentivising customers to purchase from Reformation as opposed to other brands. Finally, the company also goes above and beyond when it comes to its strategic partnerships by collaborating with Rent the Runway, Patagonia and more to gain access to lookalike audiences and markets whilst promoting industry-wide sustainability.

All these news and updates are actively distributed through a cross-pollinating approach across the company's social media accounts with the brand actively engaging with its consumers through comments, FAQs, and personalised messages. By constantly providing consumers with "high-quality up-to-date information, and delivering rewards for members' contribution", Reformation effectively utilises its online brand community as strategic opportunities, keeping its values front of mind as a key driver for brand community building (Mousavi et al, 2017). With initiatives like these, it shows consumers that the brand practices what it preaches, acting as an “example of proactively enforcing its environmental aspirations, increasing an authentic reputation” (Barnett, n.d).

While 80% of Reformation’s sales are generated through the company’s website, that is not to say Reformation’s innovative offline practices played no part in its success. In fact, Reformation’s crowning achievement stems from the brand’s success in its consistent branding, be it offline or online, helping shoppers feel and resonate with its brand’s ultimate legacy, thus

forming a brand community that exhibits the three traditional markers of: shared consciousness, rituals and traditions, and a sense of moral responsibility (Mousavi et al, 2017). Defined as “a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bond”, Reformation's brand community is able to transcend beyond geography with the help of mass media where the brand's eco-friendly driven personality appeals to a niche group of consumers who care for the environment (MacInnis & Folkes, 2016; p.413). Campaign after campaign, it is evident that Reformation's value proposition has been carefully crafted to resonate with its fellow customers, wielding a strengthened sense of brand attachment that can be deeply felt by its customers (Herskovitz & Crystal, 2010). As evident, the success of the company has been driven by various strategic marketing and e-commerce initiatives. In particular, the level of transparency the brand has incorporated into their company has built trust between them and their customers through a shared sense of duty, allowing for brand loyalty and continued success (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Perreault, 2019; p.9).

Campaign Analysis: Shoes Suck

Initially started out as a clothing brand, in 2019, Reformation ventured into a new category, launching its first-ever footwear line, Ref Shoes. Highly requested by its customers, the footwear line was one of the most popular launches from the brand. While the “production for these shoes save 52% of CO2 emissions, 70% water, and 65% waste in comparison to the majority of shoes made in the United States”, according to Kathleen Talbot, Chief Sustainability Officer at Reformation, the first line of Ref Shoes did not meet the standards the brand wanted for sustainability (Chong, 2019). It was said that the "process was tougher than the team could have imagined", leading to a pause in production, until earlier this year in 2021 when the

company decided to launch Ref Shoes 2.0 (Parisi, 2021). The relaunch features 18 on-trend styles of flats and heels from lace-up sandals to chunky loafers uses “75% fewer virgin plastics in production and is fully recyclable” (Harwood, 2021; Parisi, 2021). With knowledge that the textile industry – clothes, shoes, belts, and accessories – is the second most environmentally detrimental industry to oil production, where “footwear represents about 1/5 of the total environmental impact from the apparel industry, and nearly 1/4 of the climate impact”, it only made sense that the brand attempted to tackle this looming issue once again (Chong, 2019). As the sneaker industry began bigger leaps in sustainability with brands like Allbirds and Soludos, dress shoe and leather shoe brands must respond to evolving sustainable purchasing behaviours, propelling the launch of Ref Shoes 2.0 – a launch perfectly in line with the company’s mission.

The components of this campaign are analysed in accordance with the criteria of the campaign scoreboard.

Positioning

“Considering how much the dress-shoe sector has suffered during the pandemic, it can’t afford to not innovate” (Chong, 2019). According to NPD, the category may never fully recover since sales of shoes dropped by 71% over the course of 2020 (Chong, 2019). Tackling sustainability alone is already difficult for most brands and when it comes to dress shoes, sustainable options are even harder to come by. At the moment, there is an absence of good sustainable dress shoe alternatives which carry the same quality of traditional dress shoe and leather shoe brands. This being the case, the launch of Ref Shoes 2.0 aims to change that, overcoming the two major issues of 1) complicated assembly and 2) lack of alternatives at hand.

With sustainability being a newer concept for dress shoe makers, Reformation struggled to find the perfect leather alternatives to begin with having realised that the majority of plant-based alternatives still contained large amounts of plastic. To that end, they appropriately partnered up with the Material Innovation Initiative, “a global organization working to develop sustainable alternatives to popular manufacturing materials like leather and fur” to create plastic-free leather alternatives (Parisi, 2021). Pushing forth its brand mission, “Reformation also moved all of its shoe production to Brazil, including the sourcing of materials” as a large volume of Brazil manufacturing and material-sourcing facilities met Reformation’s ethical standards (Parisi, 2021).

In order to perpetually engage its consumers, the company continued its tactical approach of “transparency is key to accountability” aimed at building a solid foundation of credibility and trust among its consumers as the main drivers of this campaign (Langguth & Schnee, 2018; Reformation, 2021). Through transparency, sustainable apparel brands like Reformation have the chance to communicate sustainability convincingly, creating a positive impact on the growth of this industry. This is where Reformation's brand strength lies. In fact, according to the Nielsen Global Corporate Sustainability Report, “66% of global millennials are willing to spend more on sustainable brands” with sales of sustainable brands expected to grow by 4% globally in the past year, making this cohort an easier target when it comes to brand marketing (Ashton Manufacturing). However, as brands continue to instil green buzzwords as a part of their branding, the real meaning behind what sustainable fashion stands for is getting hazier and hazier, with the fashion industry currently suffering from a rising trust deficit. As such, transparency becomes the key in winning over this cohort of consumers. Taking advantage of how the brand has kept consistent with the brand’s initial messaging and persona, Reformation is

well positioned to strengthen and enhance its authentic customer–brand relations, solidifying its brand community that consists of individuals who identify socially with the company’s goals.

Core Elements: Integration & Value Proposition

Entirely executed online, the core elements of the “Shoes Suck” campaign consists of a video series, an educational landing page, Instagram revamp, followed by a collection of sponsored ads. Since Reformation is known to cross-pollinate its content across channels, all of these components are very similar in nature, with some being extensions of others, corresponding well with one another. Taking advantage of the different features each platform has, the overall brand message of “shoes suck but our shoes suck less” is well communicated.

i. Four-Chapter Video Series

Divided into four mini episodes, the “Shoes Suck” video series features a collection of 20-50 second spots. Following a narrative structure that outlines the harmful effects leather shoe production has on the environment, the episodes are as follows: Chapter 1: Leather traceability; Chapter 2: Leather processing; Chapter 3: Leather alternatives; and Chapter 4: End of life. Each video spot features the same spokesperson doing routine mundane tasks throughout her day whilst speaking about how much leather shoes suck, concluding with the catchphrase “So? Pretty much...Shoes. Really. F*cking. Suck.” at the end of each spot.

ii. Landing Page

Echoing the message demonstrated in the video series, the infomercial landing page expands on these concepts, supporting the core messaging with data and longform explanations that invites its customers to learn more. Largely educational and nurture based, the campaign’s

call to action (CTA) which leads to purchase can only be found at the end of the webpage. Again, finishing with a similar message “To sum it up—shoes suck. But our shoes suck less. Shop Ref Shoes”, amplifying the strength of its message (Reformation, 2021).

iii. Instagram Revamp

Prior to the launch, Reformation flooded its Instagram page with editorial-like images of bare feet with small text explainers that circle back to the same message. By archiving previous posts, the said images became the only focus of the page, piquing the interests of customers. Ultimately, such elements serve to bring leads back to the campaign’s main landing page, optimising sale funnels with CTAs such as as link in bio. Playing on its slogan “Being naked is the #1 most sustainable option. We’re #2.”, Reformation tactfully twists its words for all “Shoes Suck” related posts to “Being barefoot is the #1 most sustainable option. Ref Shoes are #2.”, complimenting the purposes of their footwear launch.

iv. Sponsored Ads

Contents used for its Instagram posts were recycled and used as a part of its ad campaigns where said barefeet imagery circulated the feeds of their target audience, generating hype around the launch.

Integration & Stickiness

However, for a campaign aimed at selling shoes, Reformation took a risky and peculiar approach of selling without showing. Deflecting attention away from its feature product of shoes, the campaign hones in on the company’s larger vision of achieving sustainability in leather shoemaking practices instead. Visually, Ref Shoes are rarely seen, with majority of the campaign being pictures of bare feet accompanied by captions which claim “Shoes Suck”, Your feet

deserve better”, and “Being barefoot is #1 most sustainable option. Ref Shoes are #2”. In effect, this differentiated approach builds a sense of anticipation that keeps their customers hooked until the big product is revealed. Leveraging factual data, this campaign builds a narrative that is able to appeal to the pathos and logos of its customers.

Having set a very relatable tone for its target customers since its establishment, the brand keeps consistent with its approach in the “Shoes Suck” campaign. Following through with its winning strategy of utilising catchy slogans – heavily imbued with its brand persona –, this campaign solidifies who they are as a company; a company who is not afraid to speak up about sustainability issues. In fact, the campaign served more as a piece in the larger puzzle of the company’s mission. From slogans to longform descriptions, the messaging of Reformation’s core values remain uniform and consistent, where the seriousness of environmental expenditures are balanced out through a tongue-in-cheek approach as a way to capture the attention of its customers. Evidently, Reformation’s playful and comedic approach of interacting with its customers is a core contributor to the brand’s success in relating to its target customer of millennials. Moreover, Reformation’s constant interaction with its consumers over social media also helps nurture and strengthen customer–brand relations, reinforcing brand loyalty (Chang, 2013). Besides succeeding in capturing the attention of its target audience, attracting consumer interest in current fashion trends, through its innovative technological marketing efforts, Reformation also draws awareness towards the impacts the fashion industry has on the environment, driving home its brand mission.

Value Proposition & Results

Compared to the “Carbon is Cancelled” campaign or the thredUP campaign where shoppers were incentivised by gift cards and discounts, the “Shoes Suck” campaign lacks in that there is no inherent value in purchasing aside from a member’s satisfaction of one’s moral responsibilities. Relying heavily on the triadic components of brand communities, this campaign runs the risk of neglecting outgroup members who resonate less with the company’s sustainable missions, potentially only appealing to high community-identifiers, thus affecting campaign outcomes.

While it is still too soon to determine whether the campaign was successful revenue wise, it is evident the campaign played a significant role in enhancing the company’s brand persona and facilitating brand community cohesion. On the surface level, although viewer numbers on the video series remain low with only about 400 views each, the constant interactions as seen through the comment threads of Reformation’s Instagram demonstrates positive sentiment. It can be seen that not only are customers interested in the launch but they are also intrigued by the educational content provided by the brand, with comments like “I’ve never had more anticipation for a launch, or read a launch campaign in its entirety” and “Beautiful ✨ Both the photo and the initiative”, hence signifying success to a certain extent (Reformation, 2021). Many other comments also hinted that a lot of these customers are returning customers, if not already very loyal customers of reformation who look forward to the launch.

Customer Analysis

Like all of Reformation's other campaigns, the target market for the “Shoes Suck” campaign is aimed at “eco-friendly consumers and chic millennials alike” (Kaplan, 2015). Illustrating the overarching concept that while being naked/barefoot is the #1 most sustainable

option, this campaign empowers its female customers, using that as a point of connection to hook in consumers as they look forward to the launch. Marrying together the concepts of female confidence and sustainability, this campaign exudes Reformation's brand persona through visuals and brand messaging, setting the tone straight for Gen Zers and Millennials "who are *talking* more about the need for action on climate change" due to the prevalence of climate change content online (Tyson et al, 2021). Getting more involved with such issues, the campaign's messaging directs itself to this crowd making it easily relatable.

SWOT

To better assess the effectiveness of Reformation's current marketing strategy and explore opportunities for growth and refinement, below is a SWOT analysis that presents the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the company's initiative.

Strength	Weakness
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Well-founded brand mission and clear messaging - Strong brand identity and persona - Strength in brand communities → enhanced brand loyalty - Not fiscally driven, but rather has a differentiated approach that prioritises core value proposition of sustainability - Tech focus and ahead of the curve in their adoption of technology-infused 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expensive → higher price points may deter potential customers from purchasing - Limited stores and items - Niche target market of millennials → misses out on diversification - Relies heavily on perceived social identity with no incentive other than social enhancements in their self-esteem by associating with

retail experiences - Transparent operations that yield credibility	individuals and groups that reflect their desired identity
Opportunities	Threats
- Expansion of stores and a wider variety of items to accommodate for rising demands in sustainable fashion - Reach more customers who want a 100% sustainable lifestyle by expanding target market segments	- Needing to stay on top of consumer trends → challenges in matching their products with the ever changing consumer behavior and trends - Competing e-commerce companies → consumers can also access similar products at mass-produced stores like H&M and Forever 21 - High costs of raw materials

Conclusion

To conclude, it is clear that Reformation has created a robust brand persona that is well communicated across all channels, highlighting the company mission to merge together sustainable, trendy fashion. Created to further the brand's effort in promoting industry-wide sustainability, the "Shoes Suck" campaign is well positioned to spur conversations and new engagement beyond its customers and into the leather shoemaking industry. Nurturing customers about the detrimental effects shoemaking has on the environment, this campaign carries a larger mission than just to sell shoes.

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