

**MAF:** [00:00:00] Welcome back to Behavioral Science for Brands, a podcast where we connect academic insights and practical marketing to help improve your business and your brand. Every other week, Richard and I sit down and look at some of the country's best businesses to understand the behavioral science that's powering their success.

I'm MichaelAaron Flicker.

**RS:** And I'm Richard Shotton

**MAF:** and today we're looking at. Aviation Gin, a brand that started in Portland, Oregon, and got a massive boost when Ryan Reynolds became a minority investor. Today, owned by Diageo, it's one of the biggest gins in the U. S. market, and we're excited to talk about the behavioral science powering its success.

Let's get into it. So Richard gin as a topic is very exciting to you and I we are having a episode on Hendricks We have an episode on aviation gin I started to think maybe you had an interest because there's a special London dry [00:01:00] Variety of gin that maybe was guiding your decision for us to do two gins in the in the last few weeks

**RS:** Uh, I'm certainly a big fan of gin, so that might've been playing a role.

**MAF:** And aviation gin started in Portland, Oregon was. Was originally formulated to have a little bit of a different taste than let's say a London dry variety, less juniper flavor, more of a smooth finish. They were designing a aviation gin originally to better meet the American palate. Uh, so it started in 2006.

And in 2012, Wine Enthusiast rated it 97 out of 100 points. At that time, the highest rated gin in the U. S. market. Uh, in 2018, their fortunes really got a massive boost when Ryan Reynolds acquired a minority stake and really became the face and voice of the brand that we've come to all know today. Um, by [00:02:00] 2020, The aviation gin was responsible for more than 30 percent of gin's growth in the United States, according to the spirits business.

And in that same year, Diageo bought aviation gin for 610 million. So from a very small, uh, craft brand in Portland to acquisition by the world's largest spirit manufacturer, it's quite a journey. And we're going to talk about today is how the brand leverage Ryan Reynolds. Uh, to really drive a lot of its success.

So for those that aren't familiar with the work or the creative, we'll put it in the show notes, but Amer aviation, American gin really became known for its humorous short form videos that was posted on their YouTube channel and on Ryan Reynolds own social channels. Um, and it kind of, if you'd looked at the meta message.

Of all of the ads, they're poking fun [00:03:00] at category norms. They're trying to insert themselves into pop culture. Um, one of the most notable examples was their, uh, video called The Process, which has almost 5 million views on YouTube right now. And it's a satirical take on how other cocktail brands make their videos.

Um, my favorite quotes include Ryan Reynolds saying, The citrus fruits are misted with only the tears of aviation owner, me, Ryan Reynolds. Our botanicals are humanly caught, cage free and grain fed. And after apologizing to each Barry individually, we beat the hell out of them to make the gin. Uh, so, you know, humorous ads, partnerships with Virgin Atlantic, British Airways, a playful response to Peloton, a backlash that was very, uh, in the moment culturally.

And then another famous ad with Nick Cannon kind of teasing the size of his family. All of this was [00:04:00] very of the moment and culturally appropriate and, um, all using humor as a way in. And we've covered humor previously. For those that are interested in humor as part of a brand strategy using behavioral science, we have this episode 19, which is Snickers.

And we also have a newer episode on Geico that talks a little bit about how humor is used. Um, so as we dive into today's episode, Um, we're going to look at two different areas here. One, how consistent use of humor in advertising has helped Aviation Gin carve out their identity and it can be very effective.

And two, uh, how use of humor can align with the halo effect, a very important behavioral science principle that we can dive into and talk more about. Excellent. So let's start at the top and maybe you can talk about Aviation Gin's use of humor, the use of humor in advertising and your thoughts on, [00:05:00] on what aviation has done here.

I

**RS:** think that's the consistent factor between all their ads, that they are remarkably funny. And the evidence from academia would be that that is a smart business tactic. So there are individual experiments by people like Ziv,

uh, Gagain, that show humorous messages tend to be more memorable. And in commercial situations, you can get people to, to pay more.

But what's really interesting is rather than just one off studies, there are meta analyses that show the power of humor and advertising.

**MAF:** Meta analyses being multiple studies blended together, looked at. On mass to see if it holds true across multiple studies.

**RS:** Absolutely. Yeah. So back in 2008, 2009, Martin Eisend, who's at the European university in Frankfurt, finds all the studies he can.

between 1960 2004. I think you [00:06:00] find 60 70 studies. He then whittles down the studies to high quality ones. So if he thinks there's a methodological flaw or the participants aren't represented, gets rid of them. He then is 38 studies left and he looks at the consistent findings between those studies. Yes.

And he finds that there is a very, very strong correlation between the use of humor and attitudes towards the brand, uh, positive attitudes towards the ad, a reduction in negative emotions, and probably most importantly purchase intent. And when I say a strong Uh, statistical significance, he's talking about a one in 1000 chance that these results are random.

So it's a very, very strong finding. So you see this repeated finding that humour in advertising works. But then when you compare it against the use of humor in advertising, we see a very different pattern. Cantar have [00:07:00] been tracking the proportion of TV ads that try and amuse people for a long, long time, for about 30 odd years.

And what they've shown is that back in the 90s, early 2000s, the majority of TV ads tried to amuse. Doesn't necessarily mean they did amuse, at least they were trying. And there has been a long term consistent decrease in that percentage.

**MAF:** 2004, 53 percent of ads were funny or lighthearted to today, 34%. So market decline, and we can put it in the show notes,

**RS:** the actual research.

And that's again, interesting in the, we've got the academic evidence saying humor is a sensible, effective business tactic. It tends to work well yet in terms of usage. We're seeing people move in the opposite direction. So again, we've got this discrepancy and I wonder if some of it is for many businesses, you

know, they are serious entities, um, they're employing lots of [00:08:00] people, there's millions of pounds at stake.

That feels like there's a clash between frivolity and their. Serious business, but the evidence suggests frivolity, uh, isn't a frivolous business tactic, that it is a. Not a surefire solution. There are no surefire solutions, but it's a sensible stacking of the odds in your favor to use that technique to try and encourage people to purchase your products.

**MAF:** Yeah. And especially in categories where it's hard to distinguish or differentiate, you know, Geico uses it in auto insurance. Aviation gin. There's lots of gins on the market. So if you can mark out some way that you're distinct and different without breaking category norms that would otherwise make you feel way out of place.

Humor in maybe, uh, you know, in, in certain categories just doesn't make sense, but in most it feels like it can work.

**RS:** [00:09:00] Yeah. And I mean. I would argue sometimes the categories we think it won't work, there's perhaps the biggest opportunity. So sometimes humor is a very good way of getting people to contemplate topics they don't want to.

Um, famous example would be dumb ways to die. So one of the Australian metros, I think Sydney wanted to stop. Actually teenagers, young men going on the tracks. Now, rather than say, don't go on the tracks, you'll electrocute yourself and you could die. They created an animated ad. Which was sung to a basic tune and it's all about dumb ways to die.

So dumb ways to die are, you know, setting fire to your hair, you know, rolling in honey and going in front of a grizzly bear or going on the tracks on a metro. What they did there, and it was a phenomenally successful campaign, both in terms of results, but in terms of sharing of the ad, [00:10:00] was Normally, the seriousness of the topic of deaths on a railway leads advertisers to behave in a very po faced way, but if you make people, um, scared about an issue, if you make them feel uncomfortable about an issue, they tend to ignore you.

You create a witty jingle with genuine, Humor and wit and insight. It's something people will will lean into. So even in those areas where human might at first glance feeling appropriate, I think sometimes it has more, more relevance.

**MAF:** You know, it's reminding me of a interview we did together with Sarah Carter and she talks about how, um, her agency, Adam and Eve DDB.

did work in the nineties on HIV and AIDS and how to prevent the spread. And in the early nineties, there was nothing more serious, nothing more taboo than, um, than using condoms and trying to reduce the spread of HIV AIDS. And they use [00:11:00] tumor. In those ads to help get the point across.

**RS:** Yeah, absolutely.

That's a fantastic example. The other one that springs to mind for me is the classic economist ads. And we've done a podcast on that before. The, if you think about the underlying message, if you don't read economist, you're a failure, that's a deeply. Unappealing brand message. It's, it's, it's a little bit nasty, but if you add humor, you can essentially sugar the pill.

You can make an unappealing message completely acceptable. So the classic ad they ran was, uh, poster white writing. I don't read the economist, management trainee, age 42. Now you wrap up the message in a bit of wit and a bit of humor. Suddenly it's acceptable. No one is offended by that, but if you approached the problem directly and said you're a failure if you don't read The Economist, that would be

**MAF:** off putting, [00:12:00]

**RS:** to say the least.

**MAF:** So Richard, let's cut to a break and when we come back, let's look at the halo effect and how it can make humorous ads even more effective.

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**MAF:** Welcome back to Behavioral Science for Brands, a podcast where we connect academic insights and practical marketing to help your brand and your business.

Today we're talking about aviation gin, and we're talking about Ry Reynolds and the use of humor to drive brand distinction and ultimately effectiveness. [00:13:00] Um, so when we left off, we were talking about kind of more broadly the use of humor as a. Time tested proven technique that can work, and now we want to shift our focus a little bit.

**RS:** Yeah. So the next thing we want to talk about is the halo effect, because I think many people who are listening might think, well, it's all very well and good to make the brand come across as witty and funny and likable. But what's that got to do with selling products? You know, I want to convey that I'm high quality or premium or, or tasty, right?

But that approach, I don't think reflects how people actually make decisions. When people make decisions, they don't weigh up every attribute of a brand independently

**MAF:** on a spreadsheet in their mind, right?

**RS:** Exactly. What they tend to do is identify one standout facet of that brand. [00:14:00] Like it's really, really funny.

And then they use that as a guide to their feelings towards the brand and all the other different. So if you think a brand is super funny, you're also likely to think it's cleverer, more innovative, um, fresher, more ethical. You do, you excel on one metric and most of the other unrelated metrics will, will follow.

So that's not speculation. Um, back in 1977, um, Richard Nisbet and Timothy Wilson ran a fascinating study into what they called the halo effect. So they recruit a group of Americans and they show them a video of a lecturer who had a pronounced, I think it was a Belgian accent. And sometimes people see the lecture.

with the Belgian behaving in a kind of rude, unfriendly way. Sometimes the Belgian gives the same, exactly the same [00:15:00] content, but he's friendly and he's warm and he's likeable. So you've got two groups, one see the likeable presenter, one see the unfriendly presenter. Once people have watched the videos, and they just watch one of them, they are then questioned as to their attitudes towards the presenter.

And just as you'd expect, the people who see the friendly lecturer think he's much more likeable and friendly. You know, so far so obvious, but the academics keep on questioning the participants and they also ask the

participants about their view of the lecture on completely unrelated attributes. How good looking.

Do you think the lecturer was, um, how informative was the content? How intelligent was he? Now those metrics have nothing to do with friendliness, but the lecturer's friendliness affected people's ratings. So people thought the lecturer was about twice. They were twice as likely to think the lecturer was good looking if he'd been behaving friendly.

They're about twice as likely to think he was intelligent. [00:16:00] This proves the idea that if you have one standout metric, it will affect people's evaluation of you on all sorts of unrelated areas.

**MAF:** And what's critical about the idea of using humor is that's a trait you can actually affect. In a TV ad, yes. I can't affect how attractive looking I am, let's say, or you can't affect the taste of the gin, let's say, but you can in a TV ad communicate.

Exactly.

**RS:** So it's very hard to show that you're a trustworthy brand or a premium brand or a quality brand. You can claim those things, but who believes a claim? The problem with claims is good and bad actors will say anyone can say they're good looking or intelligent or trustworthy, much, much more powerful to focus on what is incontrovertible.

So you can actually be funny in an ad and that will change people's view of you in terms of your. [00:17:00] Humor and warmth. And then if you demonstrate that ability, those other metrics that are much harder to persuade people out will follow suit. So the message here would be, think about what you can effectively communicate.

In an ad, rather than what you want to communicate. And if you do the effective job, like behaving funnily, behaving humorously, those other desirable metrics will follow suit.

**MAF:** And if you compare that to before our break, looking at the use of humor and ads on steep decline. Over the last few decades, where marketers are removing one of the, I don't want to call it easiest because easiest makes it seem like it's easy to be funny in a commercial, but we're moving one of the most controllable, uh, available mechanisms to increase perception, which is it.

You can be [00:18:00] funny in a, in a, in a commercial, you can be funny in advertising and that can help raise all ships.

**RS:** Yeah, that's it. That's, there's a great way of putting it. Raise all ships. People are being too literal minded. They're thinking, well, I want to show that I'm cost effective. Therefore, the best way to do that is to talk about cost effectiveness.

I want to be trustworthy, so I should talk about my trustworthiness. The argument from the HALO effect is you can adopt a more oblique strategy, focus on an attribute that, as you say, you can control, like being funny. And if you deliver that successfully, What the halo effect shows is that your rating on completely unrelated metrics will increase as well.

And I

**MAF:** love the way you describe that because we are talking about humor and some may say, well, you took one of the best comedians of our time, Ryan Reynolds, and you're using that as your example, but take, for example, like Dove's real beauty campaign there, they took an attribute they could [00:19:00] really own, which is.

Ernest and honest interest in recognizing all beauty and real beauty and that helped raise all the attributes of the brand. Not just, uh, you know, not just that there are more earnest brand or a more conscious brand of, of, of, uh, inclusive issues. So I think to me. The point is use the halo effect for what you can control and humor is a good one to choose, but it's not the only one.

**RS:** Yeah, I think that's a very, that's a very fair point. Um, there's also some work and we're moving more towards one off studies. So, you know, treat them with will exactly, but there does seem to be some evidence in terms of who is most likely to benefit from the halo effect. And the two interesting findings from a marketing perspective are brands, which people know little about.

So launch brands like aviation are particularly affected by the halo effect, because if we don't have any pre [00:20:00] existing view about your other abilities, we are very, very influenced by that one standout metric. And then the second type of brand are those that are selling intangibles. So maybe like an insurance or a, maybe even a a gen where you're buying the image.

These are particularly, uh, strong places to think about using the halo effect.

**MAF:** Is it, is it for a similar reason that you don't have pre existing knowledge or it's hard to put on a matrix? If you're buying a large flat panel TV, there's metrics to compare, whereas something less tangible, again, it's the same problem as the first insight, which is, I don't know a lot about the brand preconceived, I don't have a lot of things I can stack up to make a.

Slightly more.

**RS:** I think you're right. Yes. You've either got lack of knowledge through product lifecycle. the beginning of this product or lack of incontrovertible data could be a much older brand, but they, they, yeah, I think there's [00:21:00] definitely overlap on those reasons. Yeah. That's very interesting.

**MAF:** So as we look to wrap up today, Richard, can we ask you to go back through the episode and call out the major, uh, few learnings that we had from today,

**RS:** three big learnings.

The first is humor is a sensible business. So we talked about the Martin Eisen meta analyses when he looked at 38 high quality papers, uh, that were trying to examine the effects of humor on advertising. One of the consistent factors was that humor boosted attention, positive brand attitudes, positive ad attitudes and purchase intent.

So humor can help you sell. The second thing we discussed was, um, The discrepancy between what academic work suggests and what's happening in the market, the Kantar data showed that brands are moving away from using humor, uh, within advertising. So that's something I [00:22:00] think people should actively push against.

And then the third interesting area we discussed was the halo effect, that if you change people's. Understanding, understanding about your brand on one attribute. It won't just affect that attribute. If you stand out funny or amusing or. Warm people will assume your other characteristics are equally positive.

So you can change overall perception of the brand by focusing resolutely on one particular quality that you can deliver well.

**MAF:** Perfect. As we come to a close, we always like to ask, uh, an interesting question. Um. We're talking gin, we're talking cocktails. A favorite cocktail that Richard Shotton would enjoy at home?

**RS:** Uh, so one or two would either be a Negroni or an Old Fashioned. Delicious choices. Is there an occasion that one comes out [00:23:00] more than the other? Uh, my son's 19 now, so he's particularly into making cocktails. So basically, uh, if he's ready to make one, I'm ready to drink one. Uh,

**MAF:** and for me, I would say, uh, a lot as, uh, revolved around the time of year.

If it's summertime, my wife's making gin and gin and tonics at G and T. And then in colder months, certainly, uh, some bourbon on the rocks would be the kind of choice. Well, that wraps up today's episode, Richard. Uh, if you found value in our discussion, please follow us on YouTube, leave a comment. If you'd like doing those things helps us reach more listeners, just like you.

And if you're interested in diving deeper in today's content, please head on over to the consumer behavior lab. com. There we have. Transcripts of today's episode, the full videos, and also our show notes that can give you deeper details and the backup materials [00:24:00] that we're talking about today. Uh, also to stay up to date with all that we're doing at the consumer behavior lab, follow us on LinkedIn, uh, where we post updates and, uh, Pat connections to other interesting information until next time.

I'm MichaelAaron slicker

**RS:** and I'm Richard Charlton.

**MAF:** Thanks for tuning in and look forward to bringing you our next episode week after next.