

Most Social Company, Most Anti-Social Media: The Trader Joe's Oxymoron

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The definition of a cult is “a misplaced or *excessive admiration* for a particular person or thing”. According to that, Trader Joe's might be considered a cult. Whether or not it meets the defined requirements of an actual cult, one thing is for sure, Trader Joe's definitely has a cult like following, a fact that the original founder Joe Coulombe is proud of, “My children say that the Albrechts [the current owners of Trader Joe's] own the business, but I own the cult (Kowitz, 2010).”

The devotion may be due to the belief that shopping at Trader Joe's is unlike shopping at your average American grocery store... it is an experience. It is a dose of fun... from the Tiki Bar decor to the fun and clever in-store marketing and branding. An example of this is a bag of carrots rebranded as “Organic Snowman Noses”. Another, a bag of freeze dried peas, named “Inner Peas”. There is a lot of wit and creativity that goes into their in store experience.



Figure 1. Example of Creative In-Store Marketing

The employees are happy, very friendly, and are there to make the customer and the customer's kids happy. Trader Joe's is known for their customer service, and even though the infamous parking lots to the actual store are on the small side, and they carry a very limited number of products, the prices and quality are pretty great.

Trader Joe's stores are above and beyond extroverted, and arguably, are the most social grocery store in America. They have consistently been ranked number one as "America's Favorite Grocery Store", but just recently were dethroned to third place by Wegman's and Publix. So things are changing. Was this just a fluke or a sign of things to come? Is this because the famously social company is also famously anti-social outside the four walls of their stores? Employees will chat you up in store, but Corporate represents a huge, subcultural oxymoron. Are we now beginning to see the fruit of their unwillingness to engage in conversations outside their stores and their hermit-like presence on social media?

Why Trader Joe's Has No Social Media Presence

Trader Joe's does not have one single official social media account. Not one. This is shocking. In fact, it is unclear if they even employ any public relations professionals at all. One could assume they don't based on the lack of social media presence and way they handle the news media and crisis on any level. Typically with absolute and utter silence. One example back in 2012, 41 people contracted salmonella from their peanut butter, the majority of whom were under the age of 10 years old (Falkenstein, 2015). The only statement made by Trader Joe's was "Out of an abundance of caution, we have removed all Trader Joe's Creamy Salted Valencia Peanut Butter from sale, due to pending health-related inquiries." Even though the manufacturer

also distributed to other stores, this was dubbed the Trader Joe's Peanut Butter recall and everyone but Trader Joe's was controlling the narrative.

Their strategy outside the four walls of their stores is extremely limited. Their one means of official communication is by way of a no frills paper newsletter called "The Fearless Flyer". In an article called *Trader Joe's Anti-Social Behavior*, the author says of their primary marketing tool:

That's like marketing your brand by stapling Xeroxed 8x11's to telephone poles. That lack of digital savvy could mean the quirky store with the Hawaiian shirts might have more in common with my 65-year-old Uncle Ben vacationing in Florida than the foodies tweeting about using Trader Joe's Organic Virgin Coconut Oil at brunch. To be fair, the coconut oil is pretty good. In an era when social media and the intel it creates are referenced like a Richter scale for brand success, Trader Joe's isn't even registering (Hoskins, 2016).

The company is so quiet, so secretive that the general public can only speculate as to why they are so reclusive. One speculated reason that has been given is the fact that the company's now deceased owner, Theo Albrecht, who also owned Aldi's, was once abducted and held for ransom and following that became very quiet and withdrawn from the public. Another theory is the fact that their products are actually the very same product as major labels and to keep their exclusivity, good pricing and contracts, they have to remain hush-hush. And yet another offered opinion is that they are really trying to go for the ma-n-pa neighborhood market feel and big PR and marketing is counterintuitive to this goal. Also, they say they save money by not marketing and pass the savings on to the customer... or at least that is what is mentioned on their simplistic website. Finally, some say it is because they feel they are attempting to control the narrative, by lack of narrative. But this idea might be backfiring on them the most, because this allows the narrative to be controlled by anyone willing to take the reigns.

Why Trader Joe's Should Have a Social Media Presence

No one can really argue Trader Joe's has been pretty successful with their strategy until more recently. They have consistently grown, expanded and their devoted parishioners sing their praises. But with the changing climate, convergence of media, and a world that has increased consumer awareness which is now fully immersed and embracing social media, can the status quo be maintained? In an article entitled *Trader Joe's! It's Not the Pirate That is Hurting Your Brand*, Reid Wegly says:

In a day and age when the majority of consumers communicate by mobile phone and an overwhelming amount of consumers make buying decisions based on local searches, the strategic decision to avoid social media is anything but strategic; rather it is suicide by community (Wegley, 2013).

The Director of Events Marketing and Communications at ClearChannel, Rainbow Kirby, conducted the most thorough research on their nonexistent social media presence. His conclusion was they need to change their tune because Trader Joe's social media presence is in the absolute control of the consumer, mostly by their fans which could very easily backfire:

All it takes is one PR disaster to muddy your reputation and plunge sales. If you are not controlling your own message in this day and age, as the Trader Joe's story illustrates, someone else will (Wegley, 2013).

If Trader Joe's decided to cease their antiquated ways and join in the conversation on social media, and implemented the same tone and way of thinking that is employed in their stores, they could really excel. Social media is a non-traditional mode of communication which in reality makes absolute sense for this infamously customer service driven company. It fits very nicely into the realm of word of mouth advertising that they have depended so much on as part of their success. It is a direct line of communication to their consumer, much like in their stores, and

just like with their product sourcing, there would be no middle man. They can control their narrative and engage their customers in the same gregarious manner they do in store.

As of right now it is not too late for them to embrace this means of consumer engagement. Playing hard to get is a tactic that does work, but it can also backfire if you give the cold shoulder too long. Eventually people move on. This might be the case for Trader Joe's if they aren't careful. Social media is a trend that should not be ignored, and if embraced, would only reaffirm and strengthen their sense of community and brand image.

Trader Joe's ownership should follow suit of their "cousin" company Aldi USA who ironically have fully embraced social media. Aldi USA has over 2.2 Million followers on Facebook, close to 90,000 followers on Twitter, almost 120,000 followers on Instagram, and over 40,000 followers on Pinterest. It makes sense, with the overwhelming popularity of Trader Joe's, they could likely be even more successful than Aldi USA with social media.

For example, competitor Whole Foods has seen a massive amount of success on social media channels as well, boasting 4.2 million Facebook followers, 4.86 million Twitter followers, 2.3 million Instagram followers, 330,000 Pinterest followers, and have about 72,000 subscribers to their Youtube channel. Numbers like this demonstrate how Trader Joe's is really missing the boat. According to Pew Research 8 out of 10 adults in the United States are online. Of those, 8 out of 10 are active Facebook users (Greenwood et al, 2016). This demonstrates that a majority of Trader Joe's shoppers are on Facebook at the very minimum.

Proposed Social Media Campaign for Trader Joe's

So having answered the question of whether or not Trader Joe's should be on social media or not (YES!), they would need a good amount of quality content and should launch with a campaign designed to successfully and quickly engage their stakeholders. Running a successful social media campaign should include the following five elements: goals, social media outlet selection, stakeholder engagement, quality content, and finally analysis of success or failure (Carnoy, 2016).

But before this campaign could ever proceed, they would obviously need to open official social media accounts on at least the main outlets, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and Youtube to begin with. They would also want to link their social media accounts to their corporate website and display them on the header of their website. The very act of opening social media accounts would be newsworthy and gain attention. Word of mouth in store would also be sure to create a buzz and fast followers.

Delving into the world of social media may require hiring of additional personnel experienced in social media and sharing Trader Joe's vision, also who contribute the same gregarious personalities of the employees shoppers have come to know and love.

1. Campaign Goals. The primary goal should be to announce that Trader Joe's now is on social media and want to engage with their followers. The goal should be to increase their following as quickly as they can at first, to increase loyalty, brand awareness, and of course, in-store sales. Since there is no established baseline, there can really be no analysis of past performance to aid in goal setting. However, studying what has worked and not worked for their competitors and sister company ALDI may be a good place to start. Notes they might take from

competitor Whole Foods that have worked to their benefit are: Twitter feeds which are customized to special interests, specific purposes for each of its individual social media outlets, and unique content with authentic personality (something Trader Joe's should excel at) (Stein, 2014).

2. Social Media Outlet Selection. Prior to launching these accounts, a social media campaign should be designed and ready to launch to help supply immediate content for these outlets. With Facebook being the dominating force of social media, it would make sense that any social media campaign should initially run through that outlet, but since the goal is to increase awareness of the fact Trader Joe's has finally joined in the conversation and opened social media accounts through all major outlets, this should be a multifaceted campaign primarily run through Facebook, but linked into other outlets as well.

3. Stakeholder Engagement. The campaign itself should be designed to include involving the devoted followers in helping supply content for several reasons. A.) Because Trader Joe's is starting from scratch, this would be a way to supply a lot of content very quickly. B.) Trader Joe's shoppers already feel a part of something bigger than themselves, this is why they are so fanatical about their love for the brand, and this is an opportunity to further deepen brand loyalty. C.) It produces a symbiotic relationship where the shoppers are rewarded for supplying quality content and Trader Joe's is rewarded with content and deepened relationships. This would be accomplished through the #madewithjoe campaign/competition using the corresponding #hashtag. The idea would be for shoppers to buy products from their local Trader Joe's--hence the #madewithjoe hashtag which also makes it feel more personal than just simple

brand recognition--and submit their creations in one of four categories: Savory Dishes, Sweet Dishes/Desserts, Drinks/Cocktails and Floral Arranging.

4. Quality Content. Campaign category marketing examples could include something like shown below to demonstrate to the followers what they are looking for in the way of content. All examples were found on Pinterest or provided by the author of this paper using actual Trader Joe's products.



Fig. 2 Source [A Nutritionist Eats](#)



Fig. 3 Source [Wine and Glue](#)



Fig. 4 Source [Love You More Too](#)



Fig. 5 Source Paper Author/[Designed to the Nines](#)

The basic idea would be the contestants would upload a picture of the finished product with #madewithjoe on it. Trader Joe's may also consider having participants attach a link to where the recipe or tutorial can be found, then encourage contestants to share their entry with the corresponding #hashtag on other social media websites, blogs, personal websites, etc. all tagging Trader Joe's. The Top 10 for each category would be selected either by Trader Joe's headquarters or popularity (i.e. most shares) or maybe a combination of both.

This type of campaign would likely appeal to food and lifestyle bloggers, which is ideal because they not only would they produce quality content, but they would each come with their own loyal followers which ideally would perpetuate the word of mouth at a much faster pace.

After the top 10 in each category have been chosen, Trader Joe's would set a specific amount of time (possibly 1-2 weeks) for their new followers to vote the winner of each category. Each category would receive \$500 (or other determined amount) worth of Trader Joe's Product of their choice, their entry/recipe featured in the *Fearless Flyer*, and travel to the final culminating moment of the campaign which would be a LIVE Facebook event, hosted by "Joe". This could be someone like Big Buddha a news reporter and actor based in Salt Lake City, Utah:



Fig. 6 Big Buddha as "Joe"

Big Buddha fits the already established Polynesian theme with a gregarious and fun personality. "Joe" would enthusiastically host the 30 minute LIVE Facebook event *Made With Joe* where the top category contestants would create a new Trader Joe's made product live in one of their flagship stores and followers would vote as the event is happening to choose the winner. During the event they could have real Trader Joe's employees engaging followers through the comment section, telling them hello and how much their loyalty is appreciated, and possibly selecting a winner at random for a \$100 Trader Joe's Gift Card. The grand prize winner would be featured in a professionally shot video on Trader Joe's new Youtube channel and an additional \$1,000 in product.

5. Analysis of success or failure. Obviously, the expected result would be a viral type start to Trader Joe's social media presence, a lot of online buzz, and excitement about the potential to be featured in not only Trader Joe's *Fearless Flyer*, but on camera on their new Youtube channel. Based on the campaign results, adjustments could be made, but this is a contest that could be replicable on an annual or bi-annual basis at the the discretion of corporate and based off the success of the original campaign.

This campaign might be ambitious for someone not yet on social media, but why not have Trader Joe's start off with a bang and put their competitors on alert that they are not only still in the game, but intend to rule the social media game just as they rule the retail fronts. By so doing Trader Joe's will give their patrons an amazing and fun experience just as they do in their stores.

But who knows. Maybe Trader Joe's executives see something the rest of us don't and are going to stick to their current plan and prove everyone wrong. Stay tuned...



ARE YOU THE ULTIMATE TRADER JOE'S FAN? HAVE YOU CREATED SOMETHING AWESOME FROM OUR PRODUCTS? DO YOU WANT A CHANCE TO BE FEATURED ON OUR NEW YOUTUBE CHANNEL? ENTER ONE OF THE FOLLOWING FOUR CATEGORIES FOR YOUR CHANCE TO WIN!



SAVORY



SWEET



DRINKS



FLORALS

PRIZES

CATEGORY WINNERS-

\$500 TRADER JOE'S PRODUCTS, WINNING ENTRY PUBLISHED IN THE FEARLESS FLYER, AND TRAVEL TO LIVE FACEBOOK COMPETITION EVENT.

GRAND PRIZE WINNER-

ALL CATEGORY PRIZES PLUS AN ADDITIONAL \$1,000 IN TRADER JOE'S PRODUCTS AND FEATURED IN A HOW TO VIDEO FOR TRADER JOE'S YOUTUBE CHANNEL.



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