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Spirits Going Hand in Hand: Vodka and the Holiday Spirit

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COURTESY OF ZIRKOVA ONE + TOGETHER

The Holiday Season is upon us, marked by merriment, greetings and the exchange of gifts. Commercially speaking, this is also the time of the year when products will be assessing whether their marketing campaigns have measured up to their sales expectations. This is also the time of the year when the business world is sizing up the extent to which the social profile of companies has been in sync with the values prescribed by the Holiday Spirit.

Author/speaker Kurt Newman, a world-leading authority on Sales Consulting and Sales Strategy, Managing Director of SalesConsultants.com.au explains:

Companies that adopt a charity or become involved in a major humanitarian cause have a distinct advantage over their competitors. Why? Because it triggers an emotional response in the customer or client evoking trust that is transferred to the product or service. Logical reasons to buy tend to be cost-centric. Emotional responses impact on a reduced selling/buying cycle time and therefore generate more sales.

Gender, in all its manifestations, is an issue that seems to have returned into the spotlight.

In today's fast-changing world, gender is no longer being considered as a reference for cultural differences but rather as the criterion for self-redefinition. Approaching life by placing our individual basic qualities above our designated social roles is so revolutionary a step that even 'Truth' itself, when it comes to gender, can no longer remain black-and-white, and has to fan out across a wide spectrum of shades of grey.

The Holiday Spirit has been identified with traditional family values, which in themselves are perceived as of a more conservative nature. Therefore, how can a product place itself in the market in order to bridge the gap between the thorough cultural specifications required by this Holiday market on one hand, and a world that has been turned on its head and seems to be at loggerheads with these same values that the Holiday Spirit represents, on the other?

It seems that Ukrainian Zirkova One + Together vodka has successfully managed to sidetrack this sticky issue. In a totally law-of-attraction new-age approach, the brand, instead of pondering on the problem at hand has aimed directly at the solution through the creation of We Are One + Together, a movement focusing on humanitarian causes 'created to inspire people to celebrate themselves and celebrate the triumph of human spirit over prejudice'

Derek Anderson, Partner of the brand explains:

" Beyond any categorization, it seems that the motto of our times is about everybody looking to being a better human being. Under this light, we have embraced several 'worthy causes'. Our focus, mission if you wish, is Human Rights in all its forms. As we launched on Gay Pride Month in the U.S., the national timing dictated that we go by a LGBTQ agenda. However, in January 2108, we will be focusing on women's issues, more specifically on a series of concerts for the ending of sexual violence against women. Just as a footnote, we began working on this project long before the first reports about sexual harassment surfaced in the news."

We Are One + Together does not tackle issues superficially. On the contrary, the organization seems to be confronting head-on the stories of human beings or groups deadlocked into social systems marked by deep-rooted intolerance. A striking example is a short video entitled *War Within* about the story of a young Muslim gay man in his late teens struggling to balance his homosexuality with his piety within the rigid framework of Islam. Trapped within the age old conflict between sin and lust he affirms his sexuality by turning towards God for guidance.

Such an approach to life marks an interesting turnaround from the decades-long traditional imagery of vodka created by marketing campaigns.

Following the saga of vodka would be like trying to chronicle the history of the entire North-Eastern Europe, with all its contradictions. Thus, according to the Poles, vodka was born in their country, a fact bitterly contested as pure legend by Finland, Sweden, the Baltic States and of course the Ukraine and Russia, all of which are major vodka producers and zealously covet the spirit as their own cultural heritage.

The seventy-year-long span of the Soviet Union across most of the 20th century - a union of states gathering under its mantle several of these countries, of which Russia was the most powerful- further enhanced the sweeping generalization, still prevailing today, of associating the spirit with all things Russian. Thus the drink has been related to Czar Ivan The terrible (who, towards the closing of the Middle Ages, established the first vodka state monopoly), the formidable Red Army (whose soldiers' invincibility in combat was attributed to vodka) even the smashing of glasses on the floor of a gypsy tavern, following a bottoms up toast, and exploding into a dance led by violins fiddling away at a frenetic pace. Even so, the strongest association would come from Great Britain with a motto composed of three magic words that would turn vodka into the most iconic drink of the second half of the 20th century.

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The catchphrase "*Shaken not stirred*" was first heard in Ian Fleming's 1953 spy novel *Casino Royal* when James Bond orders in the bar of the luxurious hotel a vodka martini (a variation to the already hugely popular vermouth martini- the favorite mixed drink of the upper classes).

Poured in its V-shaped glass held in a debonair style by Secret Agent 007, vodka were to become synonymous with luxury living - a lifestyle illustrated by sterling silver martini shakers, tuxedos, limos and drivers in uniform, private jet planes, five-star hotels and above all ravishing female sex partners seduced by the tinkle of crushed ice.

In fact, throughout its history, though never purposely aimed at male drinkers, vodka's cultural image has been identified with various forms of virility.

Such strong cultural associations make vodka's adaptation to the new societal norms all the more dramatic, yet in line with major trends for bending the rigidity of gender structure such as the case of Finland, which has become the first country where working fathers spend more time with their children than mothers do, thanks to the implementation of a right to paid parental leave reserved exclusively for the father.

Mr. Anderson specifies:

"There was a period when gender was seen as a binary issue. This is no longer the case. What is interesting is that when people deal with issues, they tend to feel righteous about them; which again can lead to tensions. Without criticizing any adverse opinion, We Are One + Together simply encourages people to be themselves in life; whatever that may be. So it is no longer about raising flags but really becomes about bridging the gaps that separate people."

With *Zirkova One + Together* vodka leaves the realm of the super glam descending into the real world. It is no longer about sports cars and supermodels but becomes about the boy or girl-next-door. Another noteworthy and very ambitious *We Are One + Together* project, in the making, is the creation of a gay-oriented mosque for which the movement is in close contact with the New York-based JQY (Jewish Queer Youth), a non-profit organization supporting and empowering LGBTQ youth in the Jewish community .

Such projects have not failed to attract the attention of the business community. Mr. Anderson points out:

"For better or for worse corporations have a very strong bearing on how this world works. Yet we all do business in this same world. A company's success can grow proportionately to the contributions that they are to the community. Then that becomes a driver for other corporations to do good in their turn. Giving contributions is actually good for business."

Such approach to business has attracted a great deal of interest from the business community.

Mr. Newman explains:

"Some of the most important attributes for gaining client trust are: -Creditable – The client believes and trusts what you are saying is the truth. You have integrity. You don't replace your conclusion for the client's. You have done your homework and help them think through the decision from their perspective -Personal – The emotional connection is one of great personal trust and empathy. You show your real self and don't take on another persona, you make the

client feel comfortable and you are able to diffuse tension with humor. -Independent thinker – You have the strength of character to express your opinion even if you expect the client to disagree. You ask questions that allow the client to reflect and reconsider an impending decision.”

A major influence on this movement was Blake Mycoskie’s California-based *Toms* shoes, which provides an impoverished child with a new pair of shoes for every pair sold.

Mr. Anderson specifies

“Great as it may be, the “buy one give one model” doesn’t necessarily work in all businesses across the board. I mean you just cannot have a “buy one bottle of vodka- give one vodka bottle away” offer. Therefore we have taken this a step further and created another model that can work for almost all categories. If you drink vodka we will offer a far superior product at a very fair price. So every time you will be buying vodka you will be making a difference in the world. And that is something that resonates with people.”

The benefits to be reaped by such a groundbreaking anthropocentric approach to a brand are many.

Mr. Newman explains:

“Whether in a Business-To-Business or Business-To-Retail , work environments should be competitive but not in the negative sense of the word, as everyone has to work as a team and solve problems. This is the so-called ‘Heart of the Business.’ However, where you come in your heart as a company , embracing a charity or a humanitarian cause, this lifts the bar further, and creates a very strong impact of solidarity among all the people involved in the company.”

Zaher Saleh, Partner of *Zirkova One + Together* concludes:

“As a product we are not afraid of approaching issues most brands shy away from. Vodka is only a vehicle to be able to carry the message of togetherness to the world. We have reached a point as a society where everyone is trying to figure out how to help others. Now there is a better combination of being both profitable and inspiring!”

It seems that in this Holiday Season, when it comes to vodka, every sip can make a difference.