Burger King’s ‘Women belong in the kitchen’ ad is a cautionary tale, experts say

By Emily Heil March 8, 2021

Burger King on Monday served up more than just a whopper of a controversy when it announced an initiative aimed at getting more women into the culinary field. It offered a case study in what not to do when promoting a social cause, marketing experts say.

The goal of Burger King’s program, which offers scholarships funded by the fast-food chain’s foundation, didn’t stir outrage, but the provocative advertising used to promote it sure did. “Women belong in the kitchen,” proclaimed a tweet from Burger King UK’s account, timed to coincide with International Women’s Day. The line also appeared in large type in a full-page print ad in the New York Times on Monday.
The eye-catching message, of course, was a variation of the ancient, sexist adage that a woman’s place is in the home. Its origin is thought to be the Greek playwright Aeschylus, who decreed back in 467 B.C.: “Let women stay at home and hold their peace.”

Since then, the phrase has been tweaked by many a feminist. You can find T-shirts proclaiming that a woman’s place is “in the revolution” or “in the lab.” Swag from Hillary Clinton’s failed 2016 presidential campaign included a needlepoint pillow that read “A woman’s place is in the White House.”

In Burger King’s marketing, it was swiftly followed by a far more enlightened caveat: “If they want to, of course.” The burger purveyor went on to note the dearth of female chefs and framed its scholarships as a way to increase the number of women in the profession.

Though some defended the company’s attempt at humor, the fast-food chain got roasted like a flame-broiled patty, particularly by women. For marketing experts, the move was yet another example of a company’s good intentions going very much awry.

Unlike some brands with track records of weighing in on social issues, Burger King doesn’t have the kind of “cultural capital” needed to make its message about gender disparity ring authentic, says Linda Tuncay Zayer, a marketing professor at the Quinlan School of Business at Loyola University Chicago. “Burger King doesn’t have authority on gender equality, and then you couple that with a bad trope, and it was a recipe for disaster.”
By contrast, she pointed to Nike, which has won plaudits — and customer loyalty — for its advertising campaigns supporting the Black Lives Matter movement and uplifting Black and female athletes.

Burger King actually has a history of sexist advertising, notes Susan Dobscha, a professor of marketing at Bentley University: The chain apologize in 2018 for offering a lifetime supply of Whoppers to Russian women who got pregnant by World Cup players in a social media post that aimed to “ensure the success of the Russian team for generations to come.”

“The company doesn’t have a firm leg to take a big gender stance, and the legs they do have are wobbly,” Dobscha says. “That makes a difference. If you wander into a gender issue and fail, people are forgiving. But if you’ve had previous fails, you’re going to be held up to a higher level of skepticism.”

And they say that while the new ad might have been in line with Burger King’s brand personality, which skews cheeky and irreverent, it’s important for companies to calibrate their advertising to the times. The current climate happens to be a global pandemic that has disproportionately cost women jobs, they note.

“You can still use humor, but using a misogynistic image to grab eyeballs — it’s just not the cultural moment to do that,” Zayer says.

And as for another shopworn adage — that there is no such thing as bad publicity — well, that one has outlived its usefulness, too, if it ever had any, the experts say.

“That’s something people used to say, but now we have data, and we know that there is such a thing as bad publicity,” Dobscha says. “And that it can ruin your brand forever.”