Can brands be our besties?

No amount of mewing or auramaxxing will help brands up their rizz if they're not compensating and crediting creators, says Bob Gold & Associates' Albert Heape.

by Albert Heape, Bob Gold & Associates | 26 February 2025

Credit: Getty Images / Cosmaa

If you're a major brand today, no amount of mewing or auramaxxing will help up your rizz to a level ten Gen Z sigma, lil bro.

If that didn't make sense to you, you're likely not as chronically online as Gen Z — much like today's corporate leaders.

Gen Z, otherwise known as Spend Z, is already earning disposable income and is ready to buy, buy, buy. With brands desperate for a drop of that sweet post-student-loan payment discretionary spending, they've turned to adopting Gen Z memes, trends and brainrot slang to appear more relatable.

But at what point does an attempt at relatability feel less sigma and more like disingenuous pandering, à la 55-year-old Steve Buscemi in *30 Rock*, dressed like a teenager asking, "How do you do, fellow kids?"

We've already seen these efforts backfire.

Adidas, for instance, was accused last year of using the Chill Guy meme without the original artist Phillip Banks' consent or compensation.

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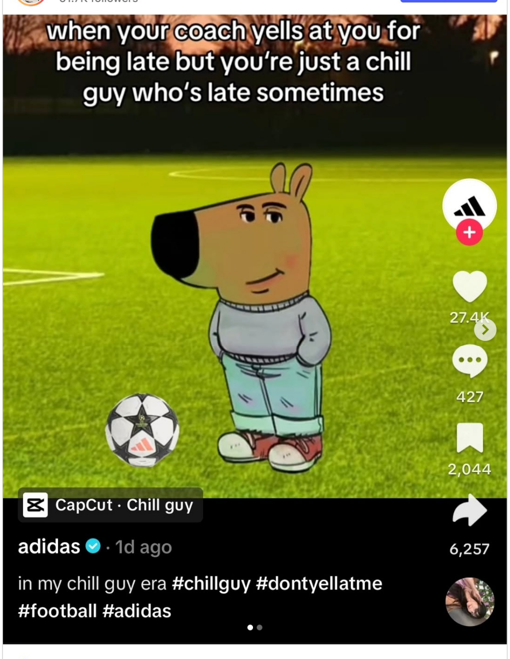

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dear multibillion dollar shoe company @adidas
why are you posting my original artwork on your tiktok page without my consent, or any form of compensation?

yours truly,
philb

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Or, take the "very demure, very mindful" phrase coined by TikTok creator Jools Lebron, which vanished as quickly as it appeared; smothered by relentless corporate meme-jacking as brands scrambled to prove Gen Z relatability.

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Memes don't appear out of thin air. They're brought to existence by content creators, artists and everyday users who pour their creativity into the internet's collective consciousness. Too often these creators don't see a dime when corporations hijack their work in a quest to be more relatable and, ultimately, profitable.

The lifecycle of today's memes exist as such: regular people have fun with it, brands latch on, and, suddenly, it's dead.

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eh it was fun while it lasted
•
#comic #comics #life #of #a #meme #or #trend #pineapple #🍍 #brand #corporation #😒

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Gen Z recognizes this corporate inauthenticity and it leaves them feeling exploited and disconnected.

Part of the trade-off of "free" digital social spaces such as X, Instagram and TikTok are the existence of brands and their advertising. Yet, brands have recently taken it a step further, anthropomorphizing corporations into our fellow Gen Z besties.

Nonetheless, when done well, the strategy can be clever enough to make us laugh and feel seen. When it's forced, we get the infamous "ick."

Not all brands get it wrong. Some manage to come across relatively genuine by uplifting creators rather than exploiting them.

Through meaningful, *paid* partnerships with creators, Marc Jacobs, for example, keeps its finger on the pulse of online culture rather than playing catch-up.

The brand collaborates with leading Gen Z voices like comedy podcasters Emergency Intercom and YouTubers Slushy Noobz, along with micro-micro-influencers like @SylvanianDrama, who stages soap-opera-esque skits with tiny Calico Critters figurines.

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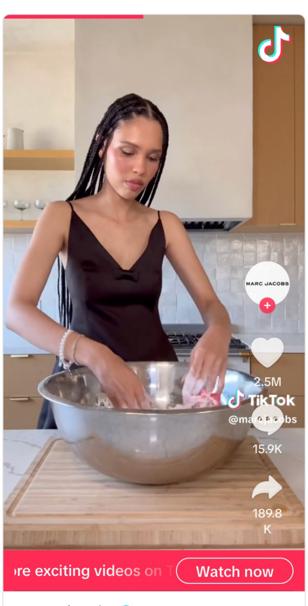
Each partnering creator brings their authentic voice to sponsored content with the brand amplifying their creativity instead of co-opting it.

The results speak for themselves: Sylvanian Drama's video promoting Marc Jacobs' Tote Bag earned nearly 2 million likes on Instagram, while influencer Nara Smith's TikTok making the designer bag "from scratch" hit 2.5 million likes.



@marcjacobs
The Tote Bag, made from scratch by @Nara Smith
original sound - marcjacobs

Collaborations like Marc Jacobs' Heaven line's Emergency Intercom collection consistently sell out in minutes — despite high price tags.

So, what's the takeaway for brands? Know your purpose and provide real value instead of chasing empty engagement. Gen Z knows the difference.

Respect creators. Pay them, collaborate meaningfully, give credit and think long-term. Not every trend fits your brand. Don't sacrifice your image and values for fleeting engagement.

In the end, Gen Z likes it when brands understand us, but being our besties might be a bit much. When they try too hard and miss the mark, well, -10,000 aura points.

Albert Heape is an account executive at Bob Gold & Associates.

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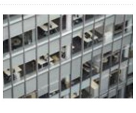

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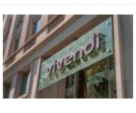

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