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# How Twittering Critics Brought Down Motrin Mom Campaign

## Bloggers Ignite Brush Fire Over Weekend, Forcing J&J to Pull Ads, Issue Apology

By [Michael Learmonth](#) and [Rupal Parekh](#)

Published: [November 17, 2008](#)

NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- Johnson & Johnson did manage to offend some mothers with an online and print campaign for Motrin that implied moms carry their babies as fashion accessories. But was it a genuine groundswell that felled the effort -- or an alliance of the few, empowered by microblogging service Twitter?



Two days after a new ad push for Motrin triggered an online backlash, J&J's McNeil Consumer Healthcare unit is pulling the campaign, from the New York office of independent shop Taxi, and begging a vocal mommy-blogging nation for forgiveness.

The campaign, which was featured on [Motrin's website](#), as well as in several magazines, was an attempt to connect with moms through the common experience (and pain) of carrying a child. But the implication felt by some of the campaign's more vocal critics was that moms wear their babies as fashion accessories, or because it "totally makes me look like an official mom."

The campaign was an attempt to connect with moms through the common experience (and pain) of carrying a child.

"Supposedly it's a real bonding experience," the online ad said, "but what about me?"

### Cause celebre

The campaign has been online since Sept. 30 and has been circulating in several magazines for weeks, but it finally caught the attention -- and ire -- of some influential bloggers Friday night before blowing up into a full-fledged cause celebre on Twitter over the weekend.

The ultimate demise of the campaign demonstrates either how quickly social media can galvanize a groundswell of opinion or how much power over online discourse they can give a few vocal tastemakers with outsize weight.

The beginning of the end for the Motrin push probably came Friday night, when Los Angeles blogger [Jessica Gottlieb](#) said she was tipped off to the ads and started expressing her outrage over the campaign on Twitter, where she has 1,018 followers.

"I am a satirist, I get humor, I talk about my vagina," said Ms. Gottlieb, who works as a freelance writer for National Lampoon and writes for [Silicon Valley Moms Blog](#) and [Celsias](#). "I'm just insulted. I'm not an activist. I don't have an agenda, but I do have children."

On Saturday, [Katja Presnal](#) (4,221 Twitter followers), a New York blogger and proprietor of online children's clothing store Skimbaco, collected tweets from offended moms and edited them into a [nine-minute video on YouTube](#) titled "Motrin Ad Makes Moms Mad," which had been viewed 21,000 times as of today.

### The spread of 'Motrin moms'

The campaign caught the attention of [David Armano](#), VP at marketing firm Critical Mass (5,582 Twitter followers), last night. He said the "Motrin moms" phenomenon wasn't just the work of Twitter celebrities and marketing gurus such as Seth Godin, who also weighed in on the kerfuffle.

"You don't have to have thousands of followers to start something like this," said Mr. Armano, [who also blogs for AdAge.com](#). "Many people with small networks have just as much influence as a few people with large networks."

Whoever it was, their impact was felt by J&J last night. McNeil Consumer Healthcare took down Motrin.com, and VP-Marketing Kathy Widmer started apologizing to bloggers via e-mail.

Amy Gates, who runs the blog Crunchy Domestic Goddess, posted a personal note from Ms. Widmer on her site yesterday. "We certainly did not mean to offend moms through our advertising. Instead, we had intended to demonstrate genuine sympathy and appreciation for all that parents do for their babies," Ms. Widmer wrote in the note.

When the Motrin site was restored today, the ad was replaced by a message from Ms. Widmer: "We have heard you."

"On behalf of McNeil Consumer Healthcare and all of us who work on the Motrin brand, please accept our sincere apology," the message said. "We are in the process of removing this ad from all media. It will, unfortunately, take a bit of time to remove it from our magazine advertising, as it is on newsstands and in distribution."

Ms. Widmer did not immediately return an e-mail or phone call from Ad Age seeking comment. J&J spokesman Mark Boston said the campaign comprised the web video as well as print ads in Cookie, Nylon, Parents, Wondertime and Lucky magazines currently on newsstands.

Taxi, which created the campaign, declined to comment. Mr. Boston wouldn't say if the incident would change the marketer's relationship the agency.

### Little ad spending against brand

The pharma marketer devotes little in the way of marketing dollars to its Motrin brands, according to TNS Media Intelligence. Last year, it spent a total of about \$15 million in domestic measured media on Motrin and Children's Motrin, and in the first six months of 2008, that figure dropped to about \$2 million.

Elisa Camahort Page, co-founder and chief operating officer of BlogHer, a blogging community for women with an ad-sales partnership with NBC Universal's iVillage, called the incident an "incredibly impressive display of the power of social media."

"[It was] amazing to have that happen over 48 hours, on a weekend in the blogosphere," she said. "People are now spreading around the apology; it's such an immediate time frame."



J&J's McNeil Consumer Healthcare unit is pulling the campaign and begging a vocal mommy-blogging nation for forgiveness.

Indeed, seven of the top 10 search returns today for "Motrin" and "headache" on Google referred to the marketing debacle.

"We now have indisputable proof that online marketing, YouTube and Twitter and all that it encompasses is meaningful and has arrived," said Gene Grabowski, chair of the crisis and litigation practice at Levick Strategic Communications. "We are seeing real consequences to a mistake. If [social networks] didn't matter, you wouldn't see this type of reaction from J&J or consumers."

~ ~ ~

*Contributing: Michael Bush, Marissa Miley and Jack Neff*

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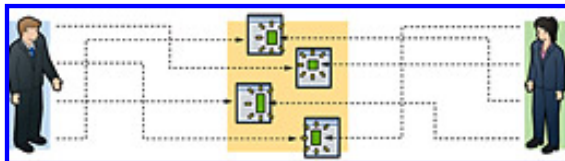
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