A Case of Comic Reflection with a Cause: Ellen DeGeneres

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As the journalist Harvey-Rodriguez (2014) put it: “Ellen DeGeneres knows the language of her audience and speaks it”.

Ellen DeGeneres was born in 1958 in Louisiana. She grew up in Texas and started to perform as a comedian in local coffee houses and cabarets when she was 23. It was in 1986 when, hosted by Johnny Carson, she made her first stand-up at The Tonight Show, achieving a resounding success. That signed the beginning of her career in TV (huffingtonpost.com, 2013) and her impact on people’s lives.

Today, Ellen is not only a great comedian that makes America laugh and dream every day with her humour, but she is also the ambassador of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual (LGBT) community. Ellen is also involved in a number of charities, which got her to raise over $50 million over the years. As a result of her involvement in social causes, Ellen is deemed by many as an “advocate for change” (Seacrest, 2014). Let’s briefly explore why Ellen is admired by so many, examining how she enables, entices, and enriches people. Let’s explore how she manages to enhance people’s happiness offering these three kinds of benefits. Finally, let’s explore how Ellen was able to build and leverage an admired brand for herself. Although each of these concepts would deserve a deeper analysis to be fully understood, they are strictly related to each other and they are instrumental to show Ellen DeGeneres’s brand building process.

In 1994, Ellen started her own sitcom ‘Ellen’ and in 1997, during the 4th season, Ellen came out of the closet when she released an interview to the Times magazine, which put her on the cover page with the title “Yep, I’m Gay”. The show’s ratings started to fall, and one year later the sitcom was cancelled (oprah.com, 2009). Many gay people started to acclaim her as their idol and pioneer, which gave her further notoriety among other groups. There was still an audience that was clearly not ready to accept gays and lesbians as part of the society and/or did not want to see them host a TV-show (Adams, 2013).

Despite the fact that Ellen was continuously attacked and she eventually lost her job, she was firm in her position and continued to fight for her rights. After three years of unemployment and depression, Ellen was chosen to give voice to Dory in the Disney Pixar’s movie Finding Nemo: this experience helped her to get right back up and join the TV industry again (McCreeesh, 2016). In the same year, Ellen started to host her own show ‘The Ellen Show’, in its 14th season this year.

The ex-president Barack Obama credited the comedian for “changing hearts and minds” about gays (Boyer, 2016) and for “countering what too often divides us, and inspiring us to be better thanks to her kindness and light” (theguardian.com). In fact, today, Ellen empowers the gay community and challenges them to go beyond their limits in personal and professional lives. But Ellen is more than an ambassador of the LGBT community. She entices people of different ages, different races, and different social statuses, by making them feel gratified and warm-hearted. In blog entry, one spectator writes how, after the show, Ellen thanks the audience for their energy and encourages them to spread joy in the
world. Ellen energizes the crowd and she engages them with her enthusiasm, authenticity, and a pinch of subtle sarcasm. Moreover, through her stand-ups, Ellen makes people reflect on sociopolitical matters inviting them to be nicer to each other (Meyers, 2012). In other words, Ellen inspires her audience every day at her show, she connects with them and she validates their opinions.

There is simply not enough space here to share everything Ellen did for her fans throughout the years. Yet, let’s consider one story about a girl from California who was affected by breast cancer and who crossed paths with Ellen in 2015. Courtney Wagner’s dream was to go to an Ellen show and eventually she was invited to one. Ellen called her on stage for a chat and gave the girl’s family $15,000 to pay for health care. Gestures like this, although they could be seen as self-promotion moves, show what an amazing impact the American comedian has on people and how she can change (positively) individuals’ lives (Fallone, 2016). Ellen is able to provide enabling benefits as she solves peoples’ anxieties, reduces their fears, and provides them with peace of mind (Park et al., 2013, 2016). In addition to giving that girl the money for treatment, Ellen raised $12.5 million for Breast Cancer research (Cooper, 2017).

Episode after episode, Ellen DeGeneres was able to build brand admiration in a period in which people were still sceptical about her coming out. The show turned to be a place where people would escape from their problems to find reassurance in her stories. She declared that for her being successful means being a better and kinder person than yesterday and using all the means she has to inspire people and transmitting her gentle compassion (MVD Entertainment Studio, 2013).

Leveraging her existing admired brand (Chun et al., 2015), Ellen was able to extend her personal brand and launch her own clothing line called ED. The e-commerce site is a proper lifestyle platform, which is consistent with Ellen’s personality and values (Eisingerich and Kretschmer, 2008; Eisingerich et al. 2010, 2015). The online store is already having great success since her parent brand was already admired and strong. She also collaborated with the clothing brand Gap, accompanying it with an ad campaign that “encourages girls everywhere to be themselves” do what makes them happy (Petrilla, 2015), which perfectly reflects what the actress stands for.

As a celebrity, Ellen has the power of attracting considerable media attention and raise public awareness (Istanboulian, 2012). Ellen uses her social media accounts (Twitter, Facebook and YouTube) to communicate with her fans and to build a strong relationship with them. People love her and listen to what she has to say on these platforms. Just to give an example, during the Oscar night in 2014, Ellen took a selfie with many other actors with a new model of a Samsung device. The selfie was immediately tweeted and it received about 14.7 million tweets mentioning the Oscars or prominent actors and films were sent out during the telecast, 25.4 million interactions about the show in Facebook, 3.3M people retweeted the photos and 2.3M liked it (Jones, 2015). Because the tweet went viral, giving a
huge visibility to the Japanese tech company, Samsung agreed to donate $1 for each tweet it would receive: Ellen chose to donate this money to Jude's Children's Hospital and The Humane Society (Cooper, 2017).

Brands are said to be admired when they provide a meaningful connection to customers’ needs, goals, and wants in some aspects of their life (Park et al., 2016). In the case of Ellen DeGeneres, people know they can count on Ellen, they trust her. People also love her and respect her and idolize her for her inspirational impact. In a survey conducted by Variety (2014), Ellen DeGeneres resulted to be the most loved celebrity endorser by gay males. The reasons behind their decision to nominate Ellen are that she is perceived as genuine, honest, trustworthy, intelligent and reliable.

As Ellen mentions in many interviews, her objective is to ‘make people happy’ and she surely does. Except for the jokes, happiness she brings in her talk show, she tries to ensure that all the meeting places with her audience can provide joyful experience. For example, Ellen has launched a series of mobile apps and games that allow her audience to have fun time with friends and family, which aligns with the slogan of ‘having a little fun today’ (Liu et al., 2015; Park, Eisingerich, and Pol, 2014). The official website of Ellen show is decorated by hilarious cartoon, cute baby and funny pets that make people laugh and feel warm. Some of these enticing elements actually come from trusting her instincts and her audience (Seifert et al., 2015). Ellen encourages her audience to send over cute, awesome, funny pictures that the audience thinks are good. Ellen then shares them on social media platforms and even on her show directly. In this way, she gathers enticing elements from everyone’s daily life and spreads the joy and happiness to more people through different platforms.

Ellen not only makes people happy by making people laugh, she also elevates the meaning of happiness.

Rather than only using pets and their loving or hilarious moments as enticing tactics to warm audience’s heart, Ellen takes a step further by being an animal advocate. She has helped to save numerous animals’ lives and promoted that animals deserve humane treatments. These actions not only remind her audience about the friendship and joy that animals bring to our lives but also encourage people to play our part to take care of animals. In addition, Ellen has dedicated the entire season 10 of the Ellen show to help her viewers in need.

Except for her personal donation to charity and offering direct help to others, she uses her influence to promote stories that encourage the audience to do the same. For example, Ellen featured Mason Wartman’s story of allowing customers to buy a slice of pizza for homeless person. It went viral soon and people have given more than 23,000 slices of pizza in total (UPWORTHY, 2015). She’s kindness has influenced millions of Americans and put smiles on people’s faces by giving a helping hand.
Because of this, Ellen’s award collection is not limited to award her talent in talk shows and acting but includes the People’s Choice Humanitarian Award and Medal of Freedom Award. Just as the presenter in the ceremony of Medal of Freedom said: “again and again, Ellen DeGeneres has shown us that a single individual can make the world a more fun, more open, more loving place”.

Ellen DeGeneres can be considered an admired brand that enables, entices and enriches people from all around the world. There is quite a bit to learn from Ellen’s risk-taking attitude, her kindness and authenticity, which led her to be the strong figure that the world looks up to today.

Questions to consider:

1. Why is The Ellen DeGeneres Show able to attract various audiences and keep their interests for more than ten years?
2. How does Ellen employ and integrate different social media platforms?
3. What can business (start-ups, innovators, brands, etc.) learn from Ellen DeGeneres?

References and Additional Reading


