The #DeleteUber Social Media Storm:

Corporate Reputation in an Era of "Alternative Facts"

Source: Promoter.io

Abstract

Does corporate reputation take precedence over facts during a social media backlash? Can that reputation influence customers to seek services with a different company, ultimately impacting its bottom line and long-term growth? This case study examines the January 2017 #DeleteUber social media storm and the impact that social activism and corporate reputation can have during a crisis. This case has important implications for chief communications officers (CCOs) and communications professionals regarding how social activism and corporate reputation can affect customer loyalty, boost a competitor's business, and fuel misinformed social media outcry through "alternative facts."

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Overview

In January 2017, President Trump issued an executive order that banned refugees and immigrants from coming to the United States from Chad, Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Syria and Yemen. The taxi union in New York City organized a one-hour protest in response by refusing to transport passengers from John F. Kennedy International Airport in support of those being denied entry into the United States. Shortly after the strike, Uber tweeted, "Surge pricing has been turned off at #JFK Airport. This may result in longer wait times. Please be patient" (Feldman, 2017, para. 2).

Despite the fact that the tweet was sent *after* the strike was over, a Twitter user noticed Uber's tweet and believed it tried to capitalize and gain business during a protest and break a strike. This #DeleteUber tweet asked users to delete their Uber apps and accounts as a boycott. The tweet quickly went viral, and within a week at least 200,000 people deleted their Uber accounts (Carson, 2017).

The second-largest mobile, ride-sharing company in the United States, Lyft, used the #DeleteUber crisis as a way to showcase its corporate values, which include being a "model for the type of community we want our world to be: diverse, inclusive, and safe" (Zimmer & Green, 2017, para. 1). Most notably, Lyft announced a $1 million donation to the American Civil Liberties Union or ACLU (Zimmer & Green, 2017).

Hours prior to the protest, Uber CEO Travis Kalanick released a statement on his personal Facebook page denouncing the travel ban executive order. Kalanick, who was also a member of President Trump's Strategic Policy Council at the time, was criticized for cultivating a corporate culture that allowed conduct such as poor treatment of employees, sexual harassment and sexual assault, and questionable business practices (Lien & Pierson, 2017).

The #DeleteUber crisis exemplifies how corporate reputation, values, and social activism can affect a company's bottom line and customer loyalty, as well as boost a competing company's customer base and profits. Additionally, corporate reputation fueled the general public's social media response

and perpetuated "alternative facts," which meant what the public *believed to be fact* was not factually accurate.

Company Background: Uber

Uber, based in San Francisco, California, was founded in 2008 by Travis Kalanick and Garrett Camp. An alternative to taxis, Uber connects passengers with drivers through GPS, making it easier for both parties to locate one another. Uber takes a cut from the total amount and then shares the remaining balance with the driver (Pullen, 2014). Uber has more than 12,000 employees and operates in 83 countries (Bhuiyan, 2017; Uber, 2017). It is considered the largest ride-sharing company in the United States by owning 74.3 percent of the U.S. ride-sharing market as of August 2017 (Molla, 2017). At the beginning of 2017, Uber, which is a private company, was valued at $69 billion (Newcomer, 2017).

Mission Statement

While the company does not have a published mission statement, there is a statement on Uber's website that showcases what its history and mission are:

> *What started as an app to request premium black cars in a few metropolitan areas is now changing the logistical fabric of cities around the world. Whether it's a ride, a sandwich, or a package, we use technology to give people what they want, when they want it.*
>
> *For the women and men who drive with Uber, our app represents a flexible new way to earn money. For cities, we help strengthen local economies, improve access to transportation, and make streets safer. When you make transportation as reliable as running water, everyone benefits. Especially when it's snowing outside (Uber, 2017).*

Corporate Values

Uber did not have a published list of corporate values. However, at the time of the crisis, reports surfaced of Uber's then 14 Cultural Values, which included (Balakrishnan, 2017; Isaac, 2017):

- ·   Making Bold Bets

- ·   Being "Obsessed" With the Customer

- ·   "Always Be Hustlin'

- ·   Let Builders Build

- ·   Meritocracy

- ·   Toe-Stepping

- ·   Principled Confrontation

Corporate Reputation

Corporate reputation is defined as an "intangible asset that allows the company to better manage the expectations and needs of its various stakeholders, creating differentiation and barriers [in regard to] its competitors" (Schreiber, 2017, para. 12).

Reports of Uber's corporate reputation prior to #DeleteUber were generally unfavorable, and included allegations of sexual harassment and assault against employees, underpaid employees and drivers, and a party culture that "protected" those close to Kalanick (Isaac, 2017).

At a global meeting in 2015 in Las Vegas, *The New York Times* also reported that, "between bouts of drinking and gambling, Uber employees used cocaine in the bathrooms at private parties, said three attendees, and a manager groped several female employees. (The manager was terminated within 12 hours.) One employee hijacked a private shuttle bus, filled it with friends and took it for a joy ride, the attendees said" (Isaac, 2017, para. 22). Additionally, Kalanick himself made headlines after an interview with *GQ* in which he boasted about his desirability with women by calling the company "Boob-er" (Rapkin, 2014). These types of descriptions in the news media may have helped define the public's view of Uber's corporate reputation and perceptions of future actions taken by Uber.

Company Background: Lyft

Lyft is based in San Francisco, California, and was founded in 2013 by Logan Green and John Zimmer. Formally known as Zimride, Inc., the company changed its name in 2013 (Bloomberg, 2017). Much like Uber, Lyft is a ride-sharing mobile app that matches customers with "carefully screened drivers" within minutes via GPS. A unique addition to the Lyft app is that it offers waypoints along the passenger's route meant for a quick stop, such as picking someone up or dropping something off before arriving to the final destination. Furthermore, employees who applied to become Lyft drivers before January 2016 receive 80 percent of the total fare, while Uber drivers receive 75 percent (Branman, 2017). Lyft is considered the second largest ride-sharing company in the U.S. with 1,600 employees operating in 250 U.S. cities (Bhuiyan, 2017; Molla, 2017). Lyft owns more than 23 percent of the U.S. market share as of August 2017 (Molla, 2017). At the end of 2016, Lyft, which is a private company, was valued at $5.5 billion.

Mission Statement

While Lyft does not have a published mission statement, company representatives have made statements about its mission, and mission-oriented language appears on various websites, including:

- To unite humanity and technology in order to make everyday rides welcoming, affordable, and memorable (Glassdoor, 2017).

- Reconnect people through transportation and bring communities together (Lyft, 2015).

Corporate Values

Lyft does not have a publicly available set of corporate values. However, its website lists partnerships with various nonprofit organizations, including the American Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity, The Human Rights Campaign, and Girls Who Code (Lyft, 2017). It is unclear how long Lyft has been actively partnered with these nonprofits. Several articles mention that Lyft's charitable efforts started *after* the #DeleteUber crisis (Brown, 2017). As of May 2017, riders can participate in a "Round

Up & Donate" program by rounding up his or her fares to donate to one of Lyft's charitable causes.

Throughout August 2017, Lyft matched all donations through Apple Pay (PYMNTS, 2017).

Corporate Reputation

At the time of #DeleteUber, Lyft was generally in the news because of the fact that it was Uber's

largest competitor. There is little public record of Lyft's corporate reputation, except for a 2016 lawsuit

brought against the company by its drivers stating they wanted to be classified as employees. Most

news reports about this settlement also included information about a similar class-action lawsuit against

Uber (Masunaga, 2017).

Despite the settlement, Lyft's corporate reputation is still generally more favorable than Uber's,

according to various reports. For example, when compared to Uber for driver satisfaction, passenger

safety, and better treatment of its employees, Lyft still outranked Uber in each category (Waldrum,

2017). The lack of public awareness, or limited knowledge of Lyft's corporate reputation, may have

helped the company increase its business when #DeleteUber gained in popularity during the travel ban

(Waldrum, 2017).

Situation Analysis

Prior to the #DeleteUber crisis, Uber made headlines that suggested cracks in the business'

foundation, including sexual harassment claims from former employees, one of which resulted in the

resignation of Uber's senior vice president of engineering; a lawsuit by Google alleging trade secret

thefts; failing to provide minimum wage to its drivers; and video proof of Kalanick losing his temper at

one of his drivers (Lien & Pierson, 2017). In comparison, news coverage about Lyft's corporate

reputation or values prior to the #DeleteUber crisis was limited and generally positive.

Uber CEO Travis Kalanick drew attention to Uber after he agreed to be on President Trump's

Strategic Policy Council, which included other high-profile CEOs, such as Bob Iger, CEO Walt Disney, and

Jamie Dimon, CEO JPMorgan Chase Bank (Gernon, 2017). When the Trump administration announced the travel ban on January 27, 2017, affecting individuals from seven majority-Muslim nations, as well as delaying travel for American citizens, Uber users took to social media to voice their disapproval or support of this policy.

One day after the policy was announced, the New York Taxi Workers Alliance announced that the organization would organize a one-hour protest of the travel ban at John F. Kennedy (JFK) International Airport. After the protest was over, @Uber_NYC, Uber's New York Twitter account tweeted that surge pricing, which is an algorithm that matches supply and demand for cars, would be turned off during the protest. When prices go up during high demand periods, more drivers are encouraged to start working which, in turn, speeds up the service (Diakopoulos, 2015).

Several hours later, Dan O'Sullivan, a Twitter user in Chicago, Ill., accused Uber of capitalizing on the travel ban and breaking the strike. The tweet used the hashtag "Delete Uber" calling for users to delete their Uber accounts from their phones. In turn, some started to post that users should opt for Lyft instead. Despite the fact that @Uber_NYC *did not* tweet during the protest as many on social media believed, some social media users believed "alternative facts" and boycotted Uber. Immediately following the popularization of #DeleteUber, Lyft announced a $1 million donation over the course of four years to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and the company publicly denounced President Trump's travel ban. Lyft also used this opportunity to showcase its commitment to be a "model" for what its leadership believes the world should be, which it states is diverse, inclusive, and safe (Zimmer & Green, 2017).

Timeline

The following is a timeline of events from the time President Trump signed the order to Uber's Kalanick stepping down from President Trump's Strategic Policy Council:

January 27, 2017 - President Donald Trump signed an executive order which immediately bars entry of citizens into the United States from seven majority-Muslim countries.

January 28, 2017

- **1:32 p.m.** - The New York Taxi Workers Alliance posts on Facebook and Twitter announcing a protest at JFK Airport from 6-7 p.m. against the recently-signed bill.

- **3:34 p.m.** - Kalanick emails Uber employees about his thoughts on the recent travel ban and posts his email on his personal Facebook page.

- **6:00 - 7:00 p.m.** - The New York Taxi Workers Alliance protest begins.

- **7:36 p.m.** - @Uber_NYC tweets, "Surge pricing has been turned off at #JFK Airport. This may result in longer wait times. Please be patient."

- **7:49 p.m.** - Co-founder and CEO of Lyft, Logan Green, responds to the recent travel ban on his personal Twitter account stating, "Lyft has worked hard to create an inclusive, diverse and conscientious community where all our drivers and passengers feel welcome."

- **9:28 p.m.** - Dan O'Sullivan tweets #DeleteUber and encourages his followers to delete the Uber mobile app. He also calls for users to screenshot their deleted messages and post them on Twitter so he can retweet to his followers.

January 29, 2017

- **12:33 a.m.** - Uber clarifies its initial tweet about surcharge pricing at JFK Airport.

- **12:46 a.m.** - Uber reposts Travis Kalanick's Facebook post to Uber employees.

- **12:52 p.m.** - Lyft announces on its blog a $1 million donation over the next four years to the ACLU to help it "defend our constitution."

- **3:43 p.m.** - Kalanick responds to the travel ban by promising a $3 million donation to help Uber drivers that have been affected by the immigration ban.

February 2, 2017 - Kalanick steps down from Trump's council.

Company Response

Uber

The day the travel ban was announced, Kalanick posted a statement to his personal Facebook account denouncing the executive order and explaining he would be "standing up for what's right", stating, "While every government has their own immigration controls, allowing people from all around the world to come here and make America their home has largely been the U.S.'s policy since its founding. That means this ban will impact many innocent people—an issue that I will raise this coming Friday when I go to Washington for President Trump's first business advisory group meeting" (Kalanick, 2017, para. 5).

After Uber sent the initial surge pricing tweet and started to receive backlash on social media, @Uber_NYC sent another tweet with Kalanick's previous statement about the travel ban, which stated, "Last tweet not meant to break strike. Our CEO's statement opposing travel ban and compensating those impacted: tp://t.uber.com/eo", linking Kalanick's initial Facebook post (Uber_NYC, 2017). Additionally, the same message was posted on Uber's company Facebook page, which linked back to Kalanick's statement on his personal Facebook page. In the media the next day, an Uber spokesperson said, "We're sorry for any confusion about our earlier tweet — it was not meant to break up any strike."

After further backlash, Kalanick announced that he had created a $3 million defense fund for drivers affected by the ban. The fund also would provide "legal services and compensating drivers for lost earnings, it includes the more expansive point of "[urging] the government to reinstate the right of U.S. residents to travel — whatever their country of origin — immediately" (Feldman, 2017, para. 10). Within one week of the #DeleteUber crisis, Kalanick announced he would step down from President Trump's council.

Lyft

Lyft made no formal statement on its social media accounts when the travel ban was announced. Similar to Kalanick's response, Logan Green, co-founder and CEO of Lyft, made a statement about the travel ban on his personal Twitter account. "1/ Lyft has worked hard to create an inclusive, diverse and conscientious community where all our drivers and passengers feel welcome" and, "2/ Trump's immigration ban is antithetical to both Lyft's and our nation's core values." (logangreen, 2017).

A day after the #DeleteUber crisis, Lyft announced in company blog post that it would donate $1 million over the next four years to the ACLU. The post was not shared on its social media pages. The statement read:

> We created Lyft to be a model for the type of community we want our world to be: diverse, inclusive, and safe. This weekend, Trump closed the country's borders to refugees, immigrants, and even documented residents from around the world based on their country of origin. Banning people of a particular faith or creed, race or identity, sexuality or ethnicity, from entering the U.S. is antithetical to both Lyft's and our nation's core values. **We stand firmly against these actions, and will not be silent on issues that threaten the values of our community.** We know this directly impacts many of our community members, their families, and friends. We stand with you, and are donating $1,000,000 over the next four years to the ACLU to defend our constitution. We ask that you continue to be there for each other – and together, continue proving the power of community. John & Logan, Lyft Co-Founders (Zimmer & Green, 2017)

Public Response

Influencer Response

Influencers and celebrities have large social media followings, which can have a significant impact on various issues. For Uber, a number of celebrities spread the #DeleteUber hashtag via their social media accounts. For example, actress Taraji P. Henson has a following of over 5.13 million, and tweeted, "DELETING @UBER RIGHT THE F*** NOW!!! #WeThePeople #LoveWILLwin #F***Hate #F***Oppression if you support HATE YO ASS GETS DELETED #BYEBITCH" (TherealTaraji, 2017). Other celebrities like Jesse Tyler Ferguson, Jesse Williams, and Janelle Monae tweeted similar statements while posting pictures of them deleting the Uber account and even a how-to step guide to delete an Uber account.

Source: Twitter (original graphic)

Social Media Response

According to Brandwatch, a social media monitoring tool, between January 27, 2017, the day

President Trump signed the executive order, and February 2, 2017, the day Kalanick stepped down from

President Trump's council, #DeleteUber was mentioned on Twitter over 141,888 times generating 726

million impressions. These impressions are important to note because this is the number of times

content is displayed, no matter if it was clicked or not. As shown in the graph below, the #DeleteUber

mentions spiked up from January 28 to January 29 causing it to trend on Twitter.
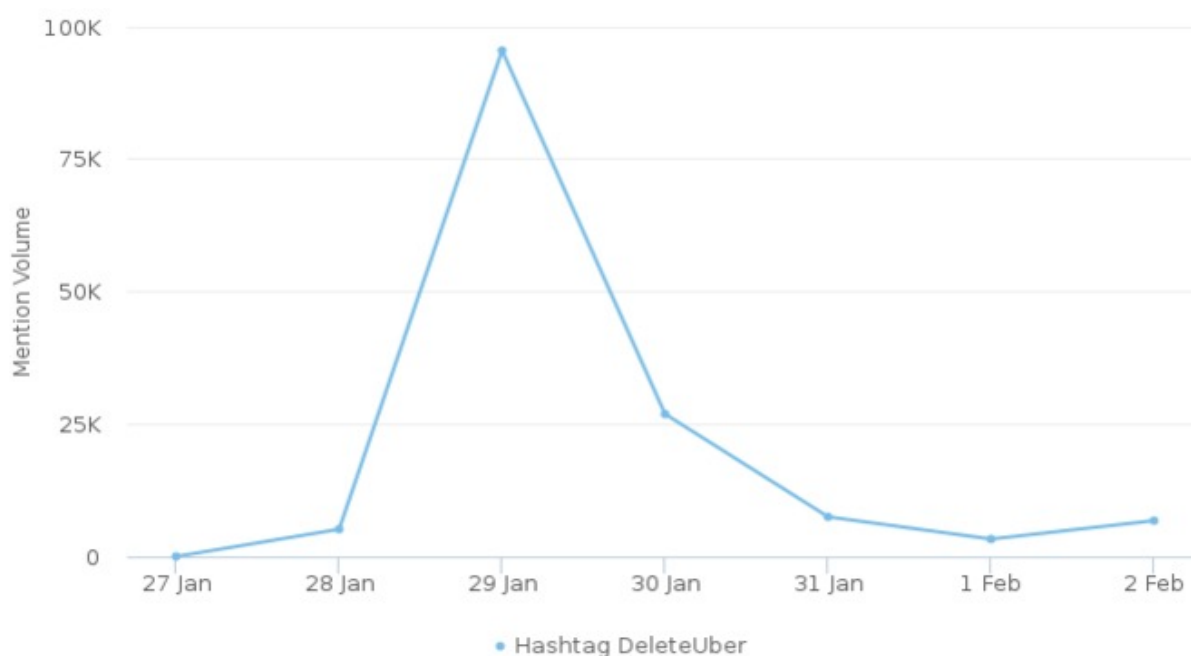

Source: Brandwatch

News Response

While news outlets had already included coverage of President Trump's travel ban on January

28, media outlets began to report specifically on #DeleteUber. Between the first #DeleteUber tweet by

Dan O'Sullivan and Kalanick's resignation from Trump's council, more than 700 news articles were

published and shared online (Brandwatch, 2017). Top news publications, including *The New York Times*

(6,449 social shares)*, The Washington Post* (667 social shares)*, The Boston Globe* (337 social shares)*,* and

Bloomberg News (120 social shares), all published articles discussing the #DeleteUber social media

movement and the implications for both Uber and Lyft's business (Brandwatch, 2017).
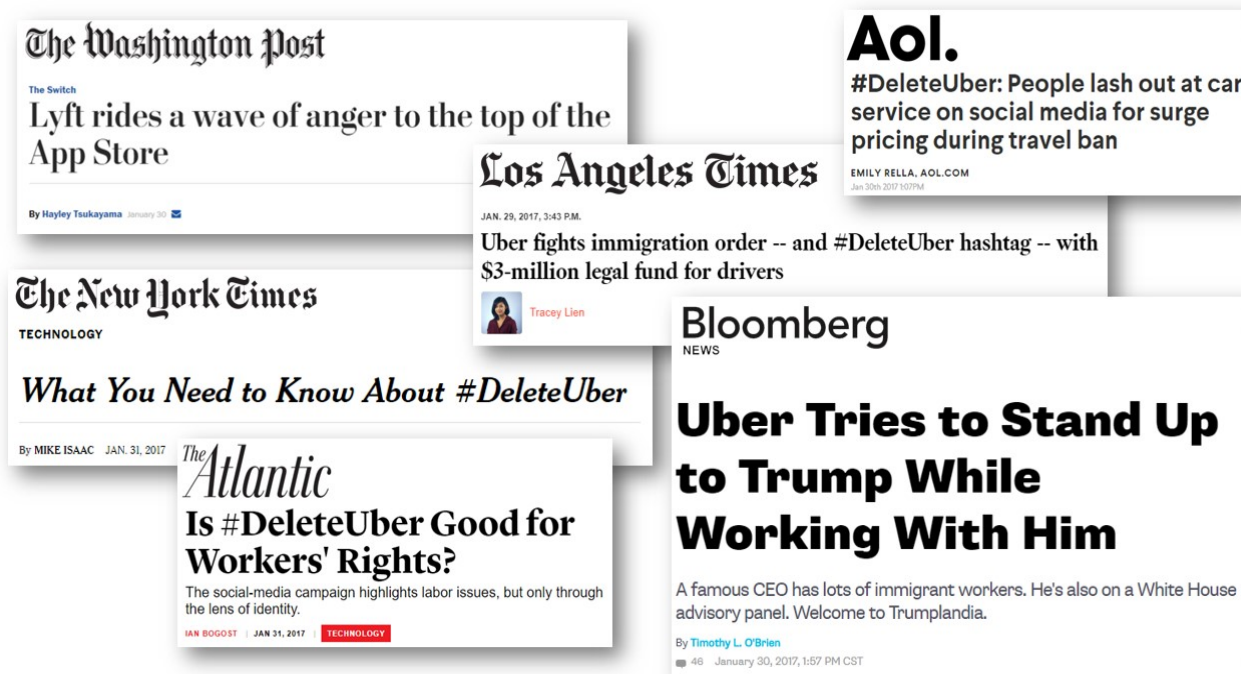
Transportation Industry Response

The New York Taxi Workers Alliance took a stance on the travel ban very early on, calling for the

original JFK airport strike on its Facebook page, saying, "Our 19,000-member-strong union stands firmly

opposed to Donald Trump's Muslim ban. As an organization whose membership is largely Muslim, a

workforce that's almost universally immigrant, and a working-class movement that is rooted in the

defense of the oppressed, we say no to this inhumane and unconstitutional ban" (NYTWA, 2017, para.

3). As Uber customers began to flee to Lyft, the New York Taxi Workers Alliance weighed in publicly on

the #DeleteUber crisis. On January 30, the alliance tweeted, "Dear liberal allies, @Lyft is not

#theresistence" (Bhuiyan, 2017, para. 15).

Business Impact

Financial Overview

Both Uber and Lyft are privately held companies, meaning that, unlike public companies, their financial information does not have to be released to the public. However, as of mid-January 2017, days before the #DeleteUber incident, investors valued Uber at $69 billion (Newcomer, 2017) and Lyft was valued at $5.5 billion (Newcomer, 2017). This vast difference is in part due to the fact that Uber operated in 83 countries, while Lyft solely operated in the United States (Newcomer, 2017). In comparison, in October 2017, months after the incident, Uber was valued at $70 billion (a 1 percent increase), and Lyft was valued at $11 billion (a 100 percent increase) (Newcomer, 2017).

Ride-Sharing Customer Behavior

According to research, the frequent Uber users spend 1.3 percent of their income on the ride-sharing service (Jeffries, 2016). This translates to a median spend of $95 a month, compared to frequent Lyft users spending $76 a month. This is, in part, due to Lyft users being younger in age overall and spending less due to having generally lower incomes (Jeffries, 2016).

Financial Impact of #DeleteUber

During the week of the #DeleteUber incident, Uber's ride-sharing market share dropped 5 percent, from 81 percent to 76 percent, and Lyft's market share gained about the same percentage (Molla, 2017).

Uber's and Lyft's U.S. market share

Source: Second Measure   *Other includes Gett, Juno, Sidecar and Via   recode
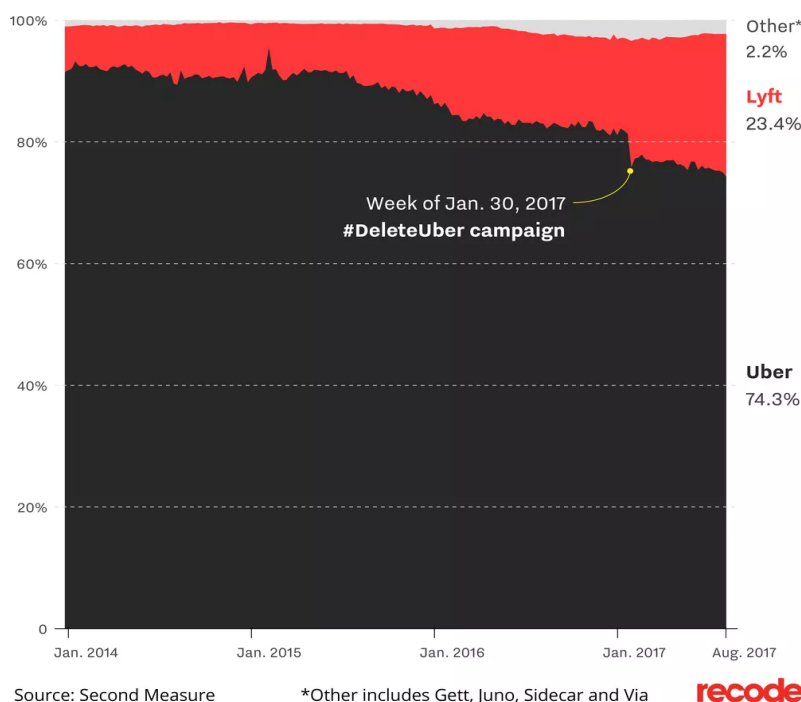
Source: Recode, 2017

In the days after #DeleteUber, Lyft saw a 30 percent *increase* in riders, while Uber saw a 10 percent

decrease in riders (Bhattarai, 2017). Over the 30 days following #DeleteUber, Lyft saw a 7 percent

increase in new users, with more than half being former Uber customers (Bhattarai, 2017). If the

200,000 deleted Uber accounts were part of the 7 percent increase, each spending the median $95 a

month, this could translate into a potential revenue increase of $19 million for Lyft's business. Of new

Lyft riders who also used Uber, 81 percent stopped using Uber altogether after #DeleteUber (Bhattarai,

2017).

One Year Later

Data suggests that the #DeleteUber event had a meaningful business impact, despite it only

lasting a week. Since the #DeleteUber crisis, Uber has experienced a downward trend as far as corporate

reputation, growth, and market share. In February 2017, an employee released a memo that outlined

Uber's poor corporate culture and complaints of sexual harassment. Later that month, Alphabet (Google's parent company) sued Uber for allegedly stealing autonomous car technology (Edelstein & Khoury, 2017). Alphabet then announced a $1 billion investment in Lyft in October 2017 (Korosec, 2017).

Amid further criticism of Uber's corporate culture, Kalanick was removed as CEO by the company's board of directors in June 2017. New CEO Dara Khosrowshahi's active efforts aim to revamp Uber and distance the company from the corporate culture formed under Kalanick. Khosrowshahi recently announced new "cultural norms" to replace Uber's founding values. These new norms include "We are customer obsessed", "We celebrate differences", and "We do the right thing" (Swisher, 2017).

Additionally, 2017 brought multiple class-action lawsuits against Uber, an investigation from the Department of Justice, and the disclosure of a massive 2016 data breach that affected 57 million of the company's riders and drivers (Dickey & Buhr, 2018). In January 2018, Uber finalized an investment deal with Softbank, which cut the company's valuation from $70 billion at the end of 2017 to $48 billion at the beginning of 2018 - a $22 billion decrease, or a 30 percent decline in value (Isaac, 2017).

Comparatively, Lyft has been on an upward trend as far as reputation, growth, and market share. Prior to #DeleteUber, Uber dominated the ride-sharing industry. However, analysts projected that Lyft's U.S. market share could increase to as much as one-third by the end of the year (Morris, 2017). Additionally, in October 2017, Lyft announced it had completed its 500 millionth ride, with its service now available to 95 percent of the U.S. population - an increase from only 54 percent at the beginning of 2017 (Lyft, 2017). In November 2017, Lyft also announced that it was expanding its services to Toronto, Canada, which marks the start of international expansion (Yurieff, 2017).

In December 2017, Lyft announced it raised $1.5 billion in capital, which is $500 million more from investors than initially projected. The additional investments boosted Lyft's valuation to $11.5 billion at the end of 2017 (Korosec, 2017). The company also solidified its partnership with Disney to

provide "Minnie Vans" in its parks to help guests travel around the park (Passy, 2017). Disney

representatives said Lyft was chosen over Uber because of its "popularity and well-established user

base," although Uber's reputation might have been a factor in the decision (Passy, 2017, para. 5).

Looking further ahead, both companies aim to go public, with Lyft planning for a 2018 initial

public offering and Uber following in 2019. According to Isaac and Benner (2017), "the two companies

are locked in something of a race for which can go public first; whichever company does will most likely

set a benchmark for Wall Street for the valuation of a public ride-hailing company" (para. 9). This means

investors are paying close attention to every move the companies make as they explore I.P.O. dates,

including how each company manages its reputation moving forward.

The #DeleteUber events are a clear picture of how a company's existing corporate reputation

can take precedence over facts during social media backlash. Chief communications officers and

communications professionals serve as the guardians of a company's reputation, and, ultimately,

reputation drives bottom line business performance and value. Companies need to earn and build

stakeholder trust and strong reputations so they are best prepared to combat "alternative facts" when

they emerge on social media. With strong communications counsel that guides company behaviors,

communication, and corporate culture worth of respect, the existing company leadership will be able to

manage a crisis without losing loyal customers to a competitor and with its reputation intact.

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