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## Anti-trans comments from Dave Chappelle and J.K. Rowling show the risk organizations face when celebrities go off script

Ebony Flake Jul 24, 2022, 4:00 AM



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**Dave Chappelle has been dealing with backlash over his comments that critics view as anti-trans.** Eamonn M. McCormack/Stringer/Getty Images

**Organizations have cut ties with Dave Chappelle and J.K. Rowling after their controversial remarks.**

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**When celebrities draw criticism, companies that depend on big-name ties often have to respond.**

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**Insider spoke with crisis experts who offered advice on when to sever problematic partnerships.**

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It sounds like the setup for a joke: Dave Chappelle, quidditch, and Paula Deen.

But for the organizations forced to deal with public backlash over celebrity ties, there's little to laugh about.

Take Chappelle, for instance: The comedian has for months been grappling with accusations that some of his jokes malign the transgender community. On Wednesday, a Minneapolis venue, facing criticism for booking Chappelle, canceled his performance for that evening.

The same day, administrators for the game quidditch — a sport inspired by J.K. Rowling's "Harry Potter" novels — announced plans to change the sport's name to quadball, in part to distance the sport from the author, who has also faced criticism for controversial comments about the trans community.

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These are just the latest examples of how organizations that enjoy the benefits of celebrity ties can draw scrutiny when the boldfaced names they're linked to face a public reckoning. To avoid damage from celebrities' public-relations missteps, companies and other organizations should be ready to sever ties with problematic endorsers, experts told Insider.

"Companies have the challenge of balancing their commitment to doing the right thing against making decisions that could potentially affect their bottom line,"

Angela J. Reddock-Wright, employment and labor law mediator and expert in diversity, equity, and inclusion issues, told Insider.

**Angela J. Reddock-Wright, employment and labor law mediator, and DEI expert, says it's important for organizations to demonstrate authenticity.** Angela J. Reddock-Wright

Authenticity is the benchmark by which companies are judged, Reddock-Wright said. This is why, she added, companies must be driven by their mission and values.

That's not always easy because for some celebs, getting into hot water seems to be a second job.

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Nine years ago, a former manager at Paula Deen's restaurants in Savannah, Georgia, sued the celebrity chef and television personality, alleging sexual and racial harassment. The result: Deen, who admitted in a court deposition to using the N-word, was dropped from her contract with Food Network.

Amid the controversy, big names including Walmart, Home Depot, QVC, and Target, followed suit, ending deals with the infamous "Butter Queen."

Not all celebrities face that measure of corporate punishment.

Chappelle has been dealing with the backlash from a stand-up act streaming on Netflix in which he asserts opinions many view as inflammatory, particularly toward LGBTQ communities. Some Netflix employees staged a walkout over their displeasure with the streaming service's decision to keep Chappelle on Netflix.

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But aside from the recent cancellation in Minneapolis, he's still touring.

And while Rowling has faced pushback — including from actors in the "Harry Potter" movies — for her controversial tweets about the trans community, there's been little

measurable consequence. Losing the reference to the game of quidditch, invented in 2005, is likely only a symbolic hit.

Even though Chappelle and Rowling appear more or less cancel-proof, experts say that doesn't mean organizations with ties to controversial celebrities can expect to always come through unscathed.

Reddock-Wright and McKensie Mack, an executive advisor and the CEO of MMG Earth, which focuses on crisis and change management, said brands and organizations that hesitate to walk away from problematic celebs were taking a risk.

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**McKensie Mack, an executive advisor and the CEO of MMG Earth, says organizations need to hit the right tone and listen to diverse voices.** McKensie Mack

## **People can smell inauthenticity. Be real.**

In a survey of consumers from the public-relations giant Edelman, 64% of respondents said they believed CEOs should take the lead on social change. But experts say inauthentic support can do more harm than good. Public outcry has caused brands to rush to the podium on sometimes divisive issues like Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ concerns, and abortion rights.

In a statement following its rebrand, the founders of Major League Quadball said: "The name change indicates a firm stance with our trans players and members."

Declarations like this demonstrate authenticity, Reddock-Wright said.

It's easy for organizations to say they support a cause, but they need to show it, Reddock-Wright said. She pointed to steps that companies took following the 2020

police killing of George Floyd. Many companies donated money to civil-rights and other nonprofit organizations. Some companies took out advertisements expressing support for Black Lives Matter.

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"While this all was well and good, employees and consumers are now challenging the companies to demonstrate long-term, sustained commitments to these issues by ensuring fairness and equity in hiring, promotions, board representation, and other issues within their organizations," Reddock-Wright said.

Ultimately, companies cannot say they stand for one thing and align with someone who demonstrates another.

### **Be internally inclusive**

In a written apology for booking Chappelle, the First Avenue venue in Minneapolis said: "To staff, artists, and our community, we hear you, and we are sorry. We know we must hold ourselves to the highest standards, and we know we let you down."

Reddock-Wright said while the venue surely lost money on the canceled show, it gained much more by way of credibility and brand loyalty.



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Mack said First Avenue's statement hit the right tone and indicated leadership benefited from listening to diverse voices within the organization.

"It's important to keep in mind that often concerns around a person's problematic behavior don't start external to the company," Mack said. "In my experience, they often start within the company."

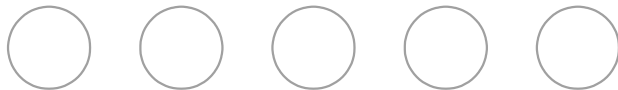
*Disclosure: Mathias Döpfner, CEO of Business Insider's parent company, Axel Springer, is a Netflix board member.*

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