

BrewDog: Should It Be A B Corp?

In 2007 a 'punk' beer, BrewDog, launched. Just a year later it had become Scotland's largest independent breweryⁱ winning gold at the 2008 World Beer Cupⁱⁱ. It produced the strongest ever UK beer, named a beer Speedball (after heroin and crack cocaine), and got into several public disputes with The Portman Group, the UK alcohol industry's social responsibility and regulatory bodyⁱⁱⁱ. It ran "cheap marketing campaigns" and deployed a website laced with profanity, rejecting all criticism of its choice of language.

*"We believe in freedom of speech and artistic expression. We don't believe in mindless censorship. As for the ASA [Advertising Standards Authority] – those motherf**** [my edit] don't have any jurisdiction over us anyway."*^{iv}

It began opening a large number of BrewDog bars. To protest Russia's anti-gay laws in 2014 BrewDog produced a "Hello, My name is Valdimir" beer, leaving samples at the Russian Consulate. The label has pictures of Vladimir Putin on it and the text:

"Hello, my name is Vladimir. I am a beer for uber hetero men who ride horses while topless and carrying knives. I am a beer to mark the 2014 Winter Olympics. But I am not for gays. Love wrestling burly men on the Judo mat or fishing in your Speedos? Then this is the beer for you!"^v

This mockery of Vladimir Putin was supported by many LGBTQ+ community members but the next year BrewDog founders, James Watt and Martin Dickie, posed in drag in a red-light district garnering criticism for caricaturing trans people.^{vi}

'Pink IPA', launched in 2018, mocked lazy marketing to women although some accused BrewDog of lazy marketing to women.^{vii} In 2019 its non-alcoholic beer, Punk AF, was launched, getting headlines often for its allusions to the f word.

BrewDog had notable strengths counting it as a sustainable business including paying its workers a Living Wage and a commitment to reforestation to fight climate change. (Unfortunately, many trees they planted later died after extreme weather events^{viii}).

BrewDog beers were advertised as carbon neutral given they bought carbon offsets. The ASA later said they could not advertise this as there was not enough proof it worked^{ix}. BrewDog make significant sustainability efforts with its internal operations and these allowed them to successfully certify as a B Corp in 2021 (80 points minimum)^x.

*“We use renewable **solar energy, 99% plastic free packaging** and our online deliveries are now carbon neutral.”^{xi}*

Table 1. BrewDog B Impact Scores 2021

BrewDog	Overall	Governance	Workers	Community	Environment	Customers
Global production	83.9	15.5	28.1	12.3	24.4	3.7
Global bars & retail	81.1	14.8	25.5	17.4	19.4	3.8

In 2021 a group 61 former employees posted an open letter to Twitter complaining about a toxic work culture at BrewDog. They complained that the company was largely there to stoke the egos of the senior managers, especially James Watt, the CEO.

“...by placing personalities at the centre of your messaging, you have inflated egos and fostered a culture within craft beer that deifies founders, and gives weight to sexist and misogynistic brewers who claim to be standing up for free speech”.^{xii}

A 2022 BBC documentary took a very negative tone about the BrewDog workplace.

“The programme included claims that Mr Watt was witnessed by staff kissing an intoxicated customer on a roof terrace bar; that female bartenders were advised how to avoid unwelcome attention from Mr Watt; and that managers would try to schedule certain female staff to be off to avoid Mr Watt's visits.”^{xiii}

B Lab launched an investigation, and the company dropped its B Corp certification.

“We have decided to step aside from our B Corp certification for the time being. B Lab had requested additional measures from BrewDog and the BrewDog board decided that these were not something we could do at this time. Though we remain committed to the values upheld by B-Lab....”^{xiv}

In 2024 the company abandoned its commitment to pay a living wage following massive loses, and James Watt stepped down as CEO.

Endnotes

- ⁱ BrewDog, Our History, https://www.brewdog.com/nl_en/our-history, accessed August 9, 2024
- ⁱⁱ Ellen Ormesher, The Drum, “BrewDog: timeline of a controversial brand”, <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2022/01/24/brewdog-timeline-controversial-brand>, May 08, 2024, accessed August 9, 2024
- ⁱⁱⁱ About The Portman Group, <https://www.portmangroup.org.uk/>, accessed August 09, 2024
- ^{iv} Ellen Ormesher, The Drum, “BrewDog: timeline of a controversial brand”, <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2022/01/24/brewdog-timeline-controversial-brand>, May 08, 2024, accessed August 9, 2024
- ^v Ishbel Macleod, The Drum, “BrewDog protests Russia anti-gay laws with #notforgays Hello My Name is Vladimir beer”, <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2014/02/04/brewdog-protests-russia-anti-gay-laws-notforgays-hello-my-name-vladimir-beer>, February 4th, 2014, accessed August 9th, 2024
- ^{vi} Ellen Ormesher, The Drum, “BrewDog: timeline of a controversial brand”, <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2022/01/24/brewdog-timeline-controversial-brand>, May 08, 2024, accessed August 9, 2024
- ^{vii} Ibid (same as above)
- ^{viii} James Beeson, The Grocer, “Thousands of saplings in BrewDog’s ‘Lost Forest’ die”, <https://www.thegrocer.co.uk/alcohol/thousands-of-saplings-in-brewdogs-lost-forest-die/690508.article>, April 19, 2024, accessed August 9th, 2024
- ^{ix} Helena Horton, The Guardian, “Advertising watchdog censures BrewDog over beer climate claims”, <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2023/dec/21/advertising-watchdog-censures-brewdog-over-beer-climate-claims>, December 21, 2023 accessed August 9th, 2024
- ^x BrewDog 2021 Aggregated Scoring Methodology Summary, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/blab-impact-published-production/DA82vm3aHsHGSgeBdcHYk7NIPMHn8zo6>, accessed August 9th, 2024
- ^{xi} BrewDog, “Planet”, <https://www.brewdog.com/au/brewdog-planet>, accessed August 9th, 2024
- ^{xii} Punks with Purpose, An open letter, to BrewDog, Twitter, June 9, 2021, accessed August 9, 2024
- ^{xiii} BBC, “Ofcom rejects BrewDog complaint over BBC documentary”, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-68321350>, 19th February, 2024, accessed August 9th, 2024
- ^{xiv} Memo from James Watt, quoted in The Guardian, Mark Sweney and Rob Davies, “BrewDog loses its ethical B Corp certificate” <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/dec/01/brewdog-loses-its-ethical-b-corp-certificate>, December 1, 2022, accessed August 9th, 2024