

WHY CAN'T WE MOVE PAST BOOKMARK BRAND CAMPAIGNS?

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McDonald's International Womens Day Campaign

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— *Peter Maxwell, senior foresight writer, LS:N Global*

For some, International Women's Day (IWD) operates as a necessary annual reminder to wider society that gender inequality remains deeply entrenched. It acts like a bookmark, bringing focus back to a discussion that too easily slips from the mind of 50% of the population. Brands increasingly attempt to help in this endeavour, using their extensive marketing reach and cultural influence to help assert the need for change.

For many others, however, the idea of apportioning one part of the calendar – be that Women's History Month, IWD or the increasingly incongruous Women's Hour – serves the opposite purpose, defining a finite period of time to deal with the issues at hand before returning to business as usual... quite literally.

Two brands quick to demonstrate their support for this year's event were fast food chains McDonald's and KFC. The former marked the occasion by flipping its signature M logo into a W, updating the marque across all of its social media channels and even replacing the signage outside one of its franchises in California. Speaking to Business Insider, McDonald's global chief diversity officer Wendy Lewis explained that the brand wanted to 'honour the extraordinary accomplishments of women everywhere, and especially in our restaurants'.

KFC made a similar gesture by swapping its avuncular figurehead for Mrs Claudia Sanders, apparently the real Colonel's wife. 'To all women of KFC and the world out there, we would like to say that your future is always bright, equal, safe and rewarding,' expounded Merrill Pereyra, CEO of the Restaurant Division of QSR Brand. 'Keep inspiring us and impacting lives, and thank you for all your hard work and contribution to our community, family and this organisation.'

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The thing about bookmarks is that they're less a means of remembering something than they are a mechanism by which you can afford to forget it. So it has proved for the fast food giants, which, by creating campaigns around IWD have only served to highlight how their industry fails women. Labour's Momentum faction went as far as releasing a retaliatory video explaining how McDonald's zero-hour contracts and meagre wages had forced some of its female employees into homelessness. In the US the burger chain has long fought against minimum wage increases, something that disproportionately affects women.

Meanwhile, KFC's declaration that women's future is 'always bright, equal, safe and rewarding' seems particularly tone deaf at a time when the #metoo movement continues to lay bare how the majority of today's workplaces are none of these things. Perhaps the most painfully resonant statement was that posted on the brand's Malaysian site, informing customers that Claudia was 'the 12th ingredient to the Colonel's 11 secret herbs and spices'. KFC was clearly making an important point about how women's contributions in the workplace are systematically concealed and co-opted by their male counterparts...right?

As former BBH president Cindy Gallop has spent years reiterating to brands and agencies alike (most recently with reference to pay inequality at WPP): 'Don't create campaigns or stunts about diversity. Don't make compelling content about diversity. Be diverse.' Rather than celebrating IWD, businesses need to take the structural steps to make it obsolete. If the social imperative isn't enough – and sadly it seems that it isn't – they should at least consider the impact on their bottom lines. A recent McKinsey Global Institute report finds that \$12 trillion could be added to global GDP by 2025 by advancing women's equality, something that is more than likely to make up for the shortfall in opportunistic marketing campaigns.

For more on how to fight gender inequality in the workplace, read our [Female Futures](#) vertical.