Adidas and Ye

Adidas got the ending right and the beginning wrong. When it finally cut ties with Ye, the statement was clear: it named the harm, ended the payments and disclosed the cost. But it took weeks of near-silence to get there, and in those weeks the silence became the story.

Most crises start inside a company. This one didn't. Adidas was judged by a partner's words, which makes it a test of how fast a brand can say what it stands for when it doesn't control the story.

Why I picked this case

The antisemitism angle mattered to me. Ye was saying openly antisemitic things, and much of the internet treated it as entertainment. That bothered me. I find it hard to imagine the same shrug if a celebrity had said these things about another minority group.

It also made me sad for a different reason. It looked like someone who was struggling, with nobody around him willing to stop it or push him toward help. A brand can't fix that. But it can decide whether it stays quiet.

How I judged it

I used Adidas's own yardstick: the values it named in its own statement, **diversity and inclusion, mutual respect and fairness**. Under them sits **integrity**, the question of whether a company's values hold when they cost money. The Yeezy line was one of its most profitable products, which is exactly why the response was watched so closely.

Then I asked three questions:

- Did the people who were hurt hear from Adidas before they heard about it?
- How long did the brand stay quiet?
- Could anyone check what it promised?

What happened

Adidas had worked with Ye on the Yeezy line since 2013, and by 2022 analysts estimated it at up to 8% of Adidas's total sales.

EARLY OCT 2022

Adidas places the partnership under review. Ye then makes a series of antisemitic statements on social media and in interviews.

THE NEXT WEEKS

Boycott calls and pressure from Jewish groups and celebrities grow. Adidas says little publicly.
This is the gap I would close.

25 OCT 2022

Adidas ends the partnership with immediate effect, stops production and all payments, and calls Ye's comments "unacceptable, hateful and dangerous." It discloses a hit of up to €250 million and says it owns the design rights.

2023

Under new CEO Bjørn Gulden, Adidas sells the unsold Yeezy stock in batches and donates part of the profits to groups fighting hate, including the Anti-Defamation League and the Philonise & Keeta Floyd Institute for Social Change.

2024

Adidas reports more than €140 million (about $152 million) donated or planned.

Who was watching

Five groups, and each one needed something different from Adidas:

- **Jewish communities and groups** feared the brand would tolerate antisemitism. They needed a clear, early condemnation.
- **The other communities Ye targeted** feared being an afterthought. They needed to be named in the response.
- **Employees** didn't want to work for a brand that looks the other way. They needed to hear the decision first, from inside.
- **Investors** were worried about losing a major revenue line. They needed the cost disclosed and the design rights secured.
- **Customers and retailers** didn't want to get caught in a boycott. They needed clarity on the product and on where the brand stood.

Three messages, everywhere

Every statement, employee note and reply draws on the same three messages, each tied to a value.

1. **We condemn this without reservation.** Ye's remarks are antisemitic and dangerous, and hate speech has no place at adidas. *(Mutual respect)*
2. **We stand with the Jewish community, including our own people.** Employees hear it first, then the public. *(Diversity and inclusion)*
3. **We will show you what we do.** Steps people can check: releases paused, a decision date, a published donation share. *(Integrity and fairness)*

Where Adidas got it right

- **A clear final statement.** It named the behavior, named the values, ended payments and disclosed the financial cost. No hedging.
- **Reassurance for investors.** Adidas stated it owned the design rights, so the product line was not lost with the partner.
- **A thoughtful answer to the stock problem.** Destroying the shoes would have been wasteful, and selling them for profit would have looked like cashing in. Tying sales to donations for the communities Ye's words hurt was a credible middle path.

Where I would push back

- **Speak within 24 to 48 hours, not weeks.** A legal review can take time, but a values statement cannot wait. Adidas confirmed a review early on, yet its full statement of values came more than two weeks later.
- **Brief employees and community partners directly,** before the public statement, so they don't hear it from the news.
- **Publish the donation share from the start.** A figure can be checked; "part of the proceeds" cannot.

The statement I think Adidas should have issued within 48 hours

MY DRAFT

We unequivocally condemn Ye's recent comments about Jewish people, which are antisemitic and dangerous. There is no place for hate speech at Adidas. We stand with the Jewish community, including our own employees and partners. Starting today, we are pausing all new Yeezy releases and marketing while we complete our review, and we will announce our decision by [date].

It condemns the behavior, names the harm, stands with the people affected, takes a step people can see and sets a deadline. Pausing releases and marketing shows action without prejudging the legal outcome of the review.

How I would measure it

By what people say and do, not by how much coverage it gets. Is the condemnation what gets quoted, rather than the delay? Do Jewish organizations and employees respond in the first week? Does the decision arrive on the promised date, and is the donation share published? And do retailer and investor questions stay in line with the cost Adidas disclosed?

What I'm taking from it

1. **Silence is a statement.** A partner's crisis becomes yours the moment you stay quiet.
2. **Separate the values decision from the legal one.** You can say what you stand for today and finish the contract review next week.
3. **Be specific about the remedy.** A published figure earns more trust than a vague promise.

Sources

- adidas terminates partnership with Ye immediately (adidas press release, 25 October 2022)
- After weeks of outcry, Adidas ends partnership (AP via PBS, 2022)
- Has the brand damage already been done? (The Drum, 2022)
- Adidas sells leftover Yeezy shoes (Fortune/AP, 2023)
- Adidas donations to anti-hate groups (NBC News, 2024)