

DISPATCHESTM

Insights On Brand Development From The Marketing Front

STANDING UP FOR SOCIAL ISSUES

Surveys show that many adults support brands taking a public stance on social issues. According to a YouGov reported survey, 27% of Boomers (55+), 41% of Gen Xers (35 – 49) and 49% of Millennials (18 – 34) are in favor of brands addressing social issues. While this may be the case, we are witnessing brands that are standing up being slammed down for taking a stand. What gives? Does it make sense to stand up for social issues? We don't purport to be experts on marketing that surfs on social matters. However, we do have some thoughts on the subject, based on observations, that we'd like to share.

It seems when brands address social issues, it's a sword that cuts two ways. On the one hand, Gillette gets trounced for coming out against "toxic masculinity." What do they know about the issue? Is Gillette accusing us men who have been brand loyal since we began shaving in pursuing our ambition to be in their words "The best a man can get" of toxic masculinity? If we feel the brand is disparaging us, regardless of the importance of the issue, we'll consider going elsewhere for our shaving needs. And, so might you!

On the other hand, the Dove brand has done quite nicely in celebrating a woman's natural beauty as opposed to trying to snow her with the promise that she can transform into the vision of an airbrushed model or celebrity, 15 or more years her junior, with its products. Not gonna happen! Plus, the women they've targeted know or should know, that they're beautiful and that their attractiveness is not dependent on superficial, physical aesthetics.

Politicians seem to know better than marketers how to handle big issues that cut both ways. They'll miss a vote on a controversial issue. And, in a way, all social matters appear to be controversial. That's how they handle it. They know that whichever way they vote, they will win some voters but lose others.

Moreover, their vote gives their opponents for their seat, or a higher position in government, ammunition to opposition them. So, for politicians, the chosen course of action is to tell voters what they want to hear and then be absent, or merely vote "present," when the issue comes up for a vote. This action is neither courageous nor authentic, but somehow, they seem to get away with it.

Life is not as easy for marketers in dealing with social issues. You're not going to get away with telling customers what they want to hear and not delivering on the goods. Nor is it appropriate to take the tack of politicians. So, you need to reconcile to the fact that your stance will alienate some in your base of customers regardless of what side of a social issue you take. (By the way, if you consider the percentages of adults who favor brand involvement in social issues, it's clear that the majority do not appear to be in favor it. These are the customers you are likely to alienate and risk them switching from your brand.) Perhaps, the best path to take is to avoid speaking out on social matters.

However, we do believe that marketers should make decisions based upon society's interests. After all, in serving customers, we are serving society. For example, if we have "negative" ingredients in our products that could harm the environment or children or animals, we should do everything in our power to replace these ingredients with non-harmful ones. We should *never* do what is expedient or boosts margins that adversely impact any aspect of society.

What we are addressing in this issue of DISPATCHES is not marketing for the good of society (societal marketing) but taking up a social issue (cause marketing) in an attempt to bond with customers. Societal marketing is authentic in serving people and society; the latter, social or cause marketing, appears self-serving, manipulative and smacks of being "political."

The role of the marketer is to create brand loyalty. Yes, we can do this with our Brand Idea and targeting those customers who believe what we believe, serving customers better than our competition and/or connecting and standing together with customers on a social issue. This last one is tricky and risky. Again, we would refrain from taking this approach unless it was in the brand's and organization's DNA, its "Why."

The late Anita Roddick, a controversial figure in her own right, is the founder of The Body Shop. She helped to popularize ethical consumerism or, might we say, societal marketing. Ms. Roddick was an environmentalist and human rights activist, as well as a businesswoman. The Body Shop marketed natural beauty products that did not use ingredients tested on animals. Additionally, she and her company are credited with being one of the first to promote fair trade with developing countries.

Moreover, Ms. Roddick chose truth over hype in marketing her brand. All of this gave her license to engage in social issues related to The Body Shop. For her, it was not a sometimes thing to capitalize on a fad or trend, but to take the lead in creating a sea change in the development and marketing of beauty care products and its impact on society. It was in her DNA and the brand she built!

So, here are our conclusions and what we suggest for your consideration:

1. *Do engage in societal marketing* – Specifically, make decisions and take actions that are in the customer's and society's best interests. Never, ever, engage in acts that are harmful or untruthful. Avoid hiding negatives or being disingenuous, for example, exclaiming "fat-free" when your product is laden with added "sugar." (How about vodka that's gluten-free?) Don't make claims for which there is no validation as appears to have been the case in the promotion of opioids for pain relief with the promise that they are not addictive.
2. *Avoid marketing on social issues (cause marketing) unless it is in the DNA of your brand and organization* - Even Unilever, parent company of the Dove brand came under fire regarding their campaign for "Real Beauty," since they are also the parent company for Axe, which promised young adolescent males that it would make them irresistible (sex objects) to women. Women permitted Dove to engage in a social issue that needs addressing, as long as it was not overtly tied to Unilever and, as such Axe. In the words of Frankenstein, "Dove Good. Axe Bad - For social causes." (Okay, we envisioned that's what Frankenstein, the monster, might say.)
3. *Stand up versus speak out on social issues* – There's a difference between "standing up" and "speaking out." The first leads your brand, what it stands for and what it does. It's born of advocacy. The second is merely promotional. The first is authentic. It's your "Why" and reason for existence. The second is merely attempting to exploit a moment in time. Stated another way, "standing up" is being authentic and transformational whereas "speaking up" is exploitive and transactional.
4. *Verify before you proceed with promoting social issues* – If you're still thinking about promoting a social issue, test to determine the impact on your business not only via changing attitudes but intent to purchase (or prescribe or use – depending upon your sector). If it causes defections from your base of loyal users (check top box and second box ratings!), then you should think twice before going forward with it. It is far more costly to create a new customer than it is to maintain a customer. Moreover, it is rare that a radical change (and speaking up on social matters may be considered radical) will bring in more new customers than it loses from the action.
5. *Make sure the social issue you address fits your brand perfectly* – Engaging in social issues should connect customers to your brand's benefits and relevant, meaningful differentiation. A good example is Dawn Dishwashing Brand. Dawn, the number one dishwashing detergent in North America, is "tough on grease, yet gentle." They demonstrate their value proposition in the spot that follows, where Dawn is used in the care of wildlife that has been despoiled by oil pollution <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLoSjIknSoU> Dawn has donated thousands of bottles to aid rescue workers at The Marine Mammal Center and International Bird Rescue to rescue and release more than 75,000 wild animals from oil pollution. Their actions represent standing up for a significant social issue that clearly connects back to the brand's performance.

Engage in societal marketing. However, think twice about speaking up on social issues (cause marketing) unless you are willing to stand up for them and to the potential barrage of criticism and highly likely defections from your brand that you are bound to experience.

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