

Brands in times of activism

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Introduction

It is a fairly modern idea that brands should act in times of sociocultural crisis. Only recently have companies evolved into self-aware organisms with as much character, individuality, and expression as the people that consume them.

Consequently, consumers now view brands as a reflection of their own identities and values. This is the intended effect of branding. When a company becomes a brand, it changes the fundamental contract between themselves and consumers to go beyond the transactional exchange of goods and services. By initiating deeply personal relationships with their consumers, brands gain loyalty and profitability, but also responsibility. The new brand-to-consumer contract now calls for brands to live and act by free-willed beliefs under the surveillance of their patrons.

Just as people can detect the hypocrisy of their neighbors, so can they in their brands. Brands that show support through black-backdropped, sans serif declarations on social media without addressing their internal shortcomings are seen as value signalling, not showing vulnerability (see: Away, Reformation, food brands). When brands speak during crises, they voluntarily place themselves under even greater scrutiny from consumers, who look for accompanying actions to back these statements. Yet any action without clarity can be self-sabotaging, resulting in social media storms, advertiser pullouts, and immediate stock drops. When actions are misaligned with brands' historical activity, they appear insincere (see: NFL, <u>Starbucks</u>). The brands most prepared to speak during a crisis are those who have grown equity with communities in need through long-term commitments, marketing risks, and dedicated products (see: <u>Ben & Jerry's, Fenty</u>).

That said, brands without a shining track record can find ways to support a movement through introspection. Before determining how they should act, brands must first understand different public views, and confront the question of whether they should act at all. In finding the answer, each brand should consider how its historical actions, company values, and existing audience align with the cause at hand. **Visualized together on the following page, these considerations guide us toward the appropriate action.**



Leader of Action

Principles

Rally to get more involved in the particular cause & partnership you are driving.

Risk: Retaliation from opposing government or organizations.



01 For progress (not for profit)

If your organization has already been actively contributing to the cause, chances are, you have already been doing it for progress, instead of profit.

However, especially in large organizations reporting to various shareholders or power customers, you may get pressure from these constituents to correlate campaigns for cause to business profit. In some cases, the pressure can also come from potential retaliation from opposing government or groups.

It can be helpful to remind internal and external stakeholders of the company's vision, and its responsibility to serve not only its customers but society at large. **It's helpful to set ground rules and draw the line between duty and profit**, so you can stop opportunistic opinions and requests from the onset.

02 Be the catalyst (not follower)

As a leader, you can help establish and reinforce **a clear shared vision and plan** with the community.

A north star will help communities and allies stay motivated and focused on making progress rather than solutionless debates.

Use your experience, resources, and partnerships to rally new joiners of the movement around a few tangible actions they can take to drive progress.

Think fewer, bigger, one-step-at-a-time actions that you can get enough crowd force behind to make a real impact.

In moments of activism, there will be a lot of passion and energy, but also a lot of noise and uninformed opinions. Leaders with a long-term vision and plan of action will shine a light in channeling the positive momentum into sustainable progress towards change.

Leader of Action (cont.)

Principles

Rally to get more involved in the particular cause & partnership you are driving.

Risk: Retaliation from opposing government or organizations.



03 Lead by example (not slogans)

In any capacity, a great leader is one who leads by example. While slogans are magical at uniting community members around a common goal, and instill emotional attachment to the cause, **leaders need to go to the front line of the movement**, and take actions.

For example, call upon and pressure policy makers to adjust policies to benefit the movement; invest in seismic changes in your industry or supply chain; be on the board of industry associations fighting for the cause; meaningful partnership with non-profit organizations, not just in the form of financial support but collaboration at expertise and individual level.

04 Share valuable information (not widely aware)

Fortunately and unfortunately, there are a lot of voices, amplified by social media, during moments of activism. Some are important and helpful, others can be misleading, not to mention fake news and bots carrying propaganda.

Lend your experience and knowledge to consumers, grassroots organizations, and businesses. Help **surface trustworthy voices and resources above the noise with owned and paid communications.**

On the flip side, you can also consider this newly emerging <u>technique</u> of boldly drowning fake/ opposing social posts originated by K-Pop fans and adopted by John Oliver, with a sense of humor.



Leader of Action Examples



COMMON THREADS INITIATIVE RENCE The distance of perturbation and the Common sector of the sector of the sector of the Common sector of the sector

ANSWER WITH ACTION UNDER UNDER

'Don't buy this jacket' ad, 2011

Patagonia Action Works' platform, 2016 - present. \$2.9M value created against land protection

Ben & Jerry's

Calling on the president and governors, while educating consumers with tangible actions and tools



Sesame Street

Sesame Street has been a leader in diversity and equality since day one. The townhall provided important information and education for parents and schools



P&G

P&G has been calling attention to racial bias when 'no one was looking'.

It partnered with Global Citizen to bring attention to efforts aimed at ending the use of cash bail in New York State





Elevate the Community

Principles

Lift up the community you serve. Let them lead you to the right actions give the spotlight to them, and help them realize their visions.

Risk: Alienating a solid chunk of the consumer base.



01 For progress (not for profit)

Let's rethink the term 'cause marketing'. It implies that helping with a cause is a marketing tactic, whose ultimate goal is to drive profit for the company.

Today, brands need to realize doing the right thing is a responsibility and ethics requirement, not a means to business growth. This is especially true among publicly traded companies, where satisfying shareholders (with profit) is not enough, and measuring up to customer expectation is pivotal. The fundamental contract between brands and consumers has changed. It has gone beyond the transactional exchange of goods and services. The contract, especially for big corporations and known brands, is also built on shared beliefs and identities.

The goal of taking actions, be it an individual or brand, is to improve society as a responsible citizen and a member of the collective community. **The KPI of these actions should never be about sales or brand favorability, but rather, impact on the community.**

Stop calling it 'cause marketing'.

02 Be a platform (not a solution)

Admit that most of us, brands included, don't understand the community's daily lived experiences, especially if we haven't been actively fighting the cause historically.

We are not going to be the heroes. Heroes live among the community, who have been coming up with brilliant solutions and support for each other.

Our role is to give them a platform, let their voices be heard, recognize their accomplishments, and help execute their visions. Offer up tools and resources, and then get out of the way. Let the community lead.

Amplify their ideas, not ours.

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Elevate the Community (cont.)

Principles

Lift up the community you serve. Let them lead you to the right actions give the spotlight to them, and help them realize their visions.

Risk: Alienating a solid chunk of the consumer base.



03 Act to add value (not ride the wave)

In the past, when brands took a stance or aligned with marginalized communities, they got praised. That has changed. Public figures and brands who seek credit by issuing feel-good statements or featuring members of the community are being asked: 'what are you doing to help?' The community and its members are the driving force of change. By simply featuring or aligning with them, brands are actually taking credit away from what the community is doing, rather than adding value.

Instead, ask **'what** *new* opportunities can we bring to the community?' 'what *sustainable and long term* resources can we provide to the community?'

If it's something the community can achieve without us, then we are not adding value.

04 Amplify the community's voice to all (not just among the community)

The community already knows their own excellence, stories, and issues. What they need is to have these stories be told to the mass.

Educating the mass on issues will help the community get more understanding and support. Telling positive community stories to the mass will help break down stereotypes and biases. Proudly introducing & dimensionalizing community's culture to the mass will elevate its soft power.

Your multicultural marketing initiative is designed to generate profit from the community, hence the target audience being the community. This should not be part of your multicultural marketing initiative, as discussed in the 'for progress, not for profit' section. This is about **influencing the mass with the voices from the community.**

Will stories and POVs from the community resonate with the mass? Absolutely, as evidenced by the current Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, the mainstream success of Black Panther, and hip hop.



Elevate the Community

Examples

<u>#ShareTheMicNow</u>

Black women taking over white women celeb's insta account - amplify & elevate



Genius

Committed to using their platform to support Black communities through initiatives like providing free music business education to independent Black artists



Sprite

Partner with hometown (ATL) artists to give back to the creative community



NBA2K

Took down servers for a few hours to honor George Floyd and added BLM shirts to their in-game clothing store to support players' virtual march around the basketball courts



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Netflix

Netflix is moving \$100 million into black owned banks, making it the largest company yet to pledge cash to historically underfunded financial institutions - an immediate and tangible impact for the community



PayPal

Pledged \$530 million to support Black and minority communities, with \$500 million devoted to minority business and startups through PayPal Ventures

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all i	must do the necessary work to dismantle racism in ts forms. This fight for social justice, equality and usion continues now. bit.ly/3fg9dPS
	Today, PayPal is committing \$530 million to support Black and minority-owned businesses and communities in the U.S. to help address economic inequality.

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Honest Self Review & Pledge

Principles

Communicate internal reflection and change first. Admit to your weakness and have a plan to change.

Risk: Consumer criticism on issues within the organization that may have been a blindspot to you.



01 For progress (not for profit)

Reasons as mentioned before.

There is **no need to use paid media** to amplify this particular response or role, as that would be more self-serving than to bring impact to the communities in need.

03 Look inward (not calling out others)

Self reflection can be uncomfortable, not to mention doing it under the public eye. But remember, **humans appreciate honesty and owning up to our faults over inauthentic commitments without confession**.

More importantly, it is worth going through an uncomfortable self reflection for the ultimate change our society needs.

02 Be an examiner (not a performer)

As we are quickly learning on social media, before brands jump into bold statements, they need to first look inside their own past behaviors and internal dynamics. This is especially true for big corporations, where visibility into every aspect of the organization is difficult.

While there is pressure to act quickly, it is crucial to self examine first. And it's OK to acknowledge that you are **taking the time to self evaluate**.

04 Improve with action (not a promise without a plan)

Pledge with organizational actions, not just statements or marketing messages. Plan with ongoing commitment and goals, and **set regular check-ins** along the way to hold key stakeholders accountable for progress.



Honest Self Review & Pledge

Examples

Genius

Owned up to the fact that, even though their company is built on Black creativity, their leadership is majority White



Milk Makeup

Responded to the #pulluporshutup tag with a full racial breakdown of their team and began a partnership with a talent development agency for underrepresented young people



Levi's

Disclosed employee diversity makeup, and shared actions to do better

BLACK PEOPLE DESERVE BETTER

We've just publicly released our U.S. diversity report. The bottom line: our numbers reveal dire underrepresentation of Black employees that requires immediate action and a sustained effort to correct. And we have a plan.

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Levis

But the vast majority of our Black employees work in our retail stores, distribution centers, or non-management positions. Only 5% of corporate employees are Black. Racial diversity declines as the corporate ladder ascends.



WE'RE COMMITTING TO CHANGE. TODAY.

We will work until the racial makeup of our U.S. corporate employees and our leadership at least match that of the United States. We pledge to improve the Black and Latinx representation numbers every year as we work toward that goal. We're launching a number of initiatives today to help us reach our goal:

- We will hire an executive-level Head of Diversity, Inclusion & Belonging in 2020 to lead our efforts to create a more diverse and equitable company and culture.
 - Starting this year, half of interviewees for open positions will be racially diverse candidates and we will ensure that they are interviewed by a panel including racially diverse leaders.
 - In 2021, we will launch a Retail/Distribution Center to Corporate career path program to nurture and promote the incredible, diverse talent that already exists throughout our company.

Pause, Learn & Decide

Principles

Tame the urge to be an 'optical-ally', and get involved in the future when/if the company is ready to fully commit to it.

Risk: Consumer boycott for not taking a stance.



01 For progress (not for profit)

Now that we've established that we should not call this cause-marketing, you can also use this principle to **evaluate the motivation** of your desire to participate in the movement.

If it's coming from not wanting to lose customers or seeing it as an opportunity to sell your service or products, but you know your leadership is not ready to commit to the movement without the incentive of profit, then you should control the urge, brace the risk of backlash, and not do it. At least not yet.

Today, not taking a stand is often perceived as taking the opposite position: be prepared for the potential backlash. However, it is worse to put out an 'optical-ally' statement.

02 Be a student (not swaying whichever way the wind blows)

When there isn't clear consensus within the organization and leadership, it's OK to take the time to learn before responding.

Educate yourself and the organization on what are at stake for the company and the communities you serve, views from both sides, and the impact on the communities either by taking or not taking actions.

Reach out to experts and communities for consultation prior to making a decision.

03 Learn the why (not brushing off personal differences within the organization)

If your personal view conflicts with your company's stance, try to grasp why your organization is not ready at the moment. What are **the risks and barriers** internally and externally for your company to be part of the change for the particular cause? This will help you become an effective advocate within the organization.

04 And the how (not giving up or choosing the easy way out)

Have **candid conversations** with organization leaders, shareholders, outside consultants, customers, and representatives from the community.

Invite experts from both sides to share their views and stories to better educate internally.

Survey your customers on their expectations of your company and use it to fuel decisions.



Pause, Learn & Decide

Examples

Reformation

Called out by former employees for optical-allyship



Reformation's sustainable facade has been hiding a racist

NFL

Recent BLM statement was criticized for corporate hypocrisy, opportunistic response and lack of brand self awareness



Facebook

Backlash and boycott from its customers (advertisers) for not taking enough actions against hate speech



Uber

Backlash after promoting its service when Taxi drivers went on strike to protest Trump's immigration order, even though Uber did not take any stance against the movement



Conclusion

In a world where the

brand-consumer relationship has become more of a dialogue than a broadcast, brands must do the work to understand what actions (internal and public) are the best representation of their values and their customers' values.

This is especially important in times when consumer activism is heightened.

As observed from the different brand reactions and actions during the most recent Black Lives Matter movement, not all responses were met with praise. While brands often feel the pressure or passion to react to a moment immediately, it is crucial to consider how your historical actions, company values, and existing audience align with the cause at hand.

There is no one-size-fits-all answer, and proper homework is highly recommended to determine which of the four roles below is the best fit for any specific cause.

Leader of Action

Rally to get more involved in the particular cause & partnership you are driving



Honest Self Review / Pledge

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Elevate the Community

Lift up the community you serve. Let them lead you to the right actions - give the spotlight to them, and help them realize their visions

Pause, Learn & Decide

Tame the urge to be an 'optical-ally', and get involved in the future when/if the company is ready to fully commit to it





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