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Taking a Brand Stand

A Disciplined Approach to Cause Marketing Strategy

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Brands and Their Parishioners

A decade ago, when people asked what a brand “stood for,” they were usually asking for a statement about the brand’s USP or its philosophy about how to treat customers. They were not, as a rule, asking for an advocacy platform.

Things are different now. Amid social change and pandemic upheaval, we see the clear emergence of “citizen brands” whose commercial success depends in part on an articulation of respected cultural values shared by customers. Brands may choose to be apolitical in the partisan sense, but they have lost the luxury of being (or appearing) completely agnostic about the needs of people across our society. There is a growing expectation that brands will be a voice and an instrument of customers’ personal values. Consumers want consumption made virtuous. Brands play a critical role.

Consumers are seeing brands as instruments of their own moral efficacy. They’re asking: How can any brand make the world a better place, and potentially, how can it help its customers do that, too?

Who’s Blazing the Trail?

Decisions regarding how a *private* company should walk in the world may flow from family or ethos or leadership priorities, but most brands large enough to make a real difference by taking a stand are public companies with many more stakeholders to consider. Scale brings mighty Amazon quickly to mind. No brand does things in a bigger way, and Amazon’s pledge to achieve carbon-neutrality exemplifies this idea of citizenship writ large. Asserting its commitment to the environment makes a particular kind of sense for Amazon, the company that literally moves our entire economy. As a visible part of the larger problem, it is uniquely equipped to be a significant part of the solution. And with its uncontested dominance in the nation’s supply chain infrastructure, Amazon understands that, right now, it has no need to convey *competence*. What Amazon needs to demonstrate is social responsibility.

Subaru, by contrast, is a brand, whose “love” positioning has always interwoven product value with social value. A \$250-donation for every car purchased gives consumers the chance to choose from a menu of causes—more relevant than ever given the unique philanthropic challenges of pandemic times, though perhaps still inviting cynicism about who (Subaru or you) is really footing the bill. If customers really want Subaru to be “more than a car company,” its



mission to rebuild America’s forests may make a stronger and more vivid case. By protecting the landscape people drive to see, Subaru’s reforestation focus advances one of the most satisfying reasons people have for driving.

‘Cause Marketing’ vs ‘Corporate Ethics’

Every brand should give serious consideration to *what* values it stands for and *how* it wants to stand for those values. But it’s important to differentiate “cause marketing,” a public-facing communications initiative, with “corporate ethics,” the values a company lives by even when no one is looking. There should be alignment between the two, but reputation is a broader, deeper expression of enterprise DNA. And monitoring reputation across stakeholders is a critical initiative that many large corporations fail to tackle in a disciplined and holistic way. (We’ll take that on in a future piece.)

Choosing a *Sustainable* ‘Brand Stand’

As companies consider the relevance of brand stands and whether to take their own, they’ll have to get better at finding strategically sound positions they can hold and use to win consumer hearts and minds. Asserting claims to brand citizenship means being disciplined, not just inspired. Corporations aren’t chartered as philanthropic organizations,

but they do have the resources to be instruments of social well-being. Brands are at their very best when they fulfill their obligation to shareholders while also advancing a valuable social agenda—*the notion of doing well by doing good*.

Large corporations always have a purse with which to fund a wide array of community initiatives but those don't count as brand stands. Comcast, for instance, supports everything from playgrounds to women's issues but it spends money to highlight its commitment to internet access for underprivileged families and employment for veterans. While the Comcast Internet Essentials program is intrinsically linked to brand competence, hiring veterans is a stance that any major employer could plausibly own, so what is Comcast signaling? By honoring *service to country*, Comcast is also invoking *service to customers*. And service quality is an area in which Comcast has had significant remedial work to do.

In order to accomplish the win-win everyone wants, brand stand strategy needs to be developed as thoughtfully – and “sustainably” – as any other aspect of brand strategy.

Companies can do a world of good by supporting any cause, but the decisions should be strategic, not free-wheeling. To systematically measure the traction and stability of positions, a *brand stand mapping process* is needed to plot the causes a brand might want to own against critical dimensions.

- ✓ **Carefully consider all the elements of your brand competence.** What do customers and prospects consider you to be intrinsically good at, and what forms of giving or helping are seen to represent a logical extension of your commercial focus as a brand? That may seem like a simple question but not all brand capabilities, especially operational ones, are fully visible to those on the outside. Amazon recently broadened a two-year old initiative in support of computer education to include an even more timely gesture of support to on-line learning—calling out the fact that Amazon is not just a logistics company but, above all, a technology company. Brand stands don't *have* to feature what people think a brand is especially good at, but that's a key part of the calculus.



Take a close, hard look at the health of your brand reputation and ask what needs to be bolstered or remediated. Brand stands aren't necessarily acts of atonement but the place to start looking is historic vulnerabilities. Brand health tracking through surveys and social listening can be used to identify and prioritize grievances, but that's just the beginning. Making shrewd decisions involves creative signaling—like Comcast's support for veterans.



Pay close attention to the emotional claims elevating the value proposition.

In brand marketing, we know that the lofty top rung of the “benefit ladder” is where ultimate brand *value* resides. *For Citizen Brand, the top rung of cause marketing is where brand value and brand values converge.* As an early symbol of family haven, McDonald's committed itself to support for families of kids with cancer with its Ronald McDonald House—an early and ambitious climb to the peak of brand value through cause marketing. McDonald's devotes less national advertising attention to it today, but McDonald House brick-and-mortar are a lasting testament to brand aspirations. Opportunities always need to be couture-cut. Some brands are using cause marketing to create brand identity. By giving socks away to people experiencing homelessness, Bombas is warming hearts first, feet second.



Consider how ownable and how durable a cause may be. Once the most promising opportunities have been identified, a company needs to broaden its sight line to include larger landscape considerations like “ownability” and “durability.” Some causes are fair game for an entire industry, but being a first-mover creates an opportunity for differentiation, even if others are free to follow. When Tide (P&G) takes on the cause of water conservation, for instance, it reinforces its USP (concentrated cleaning power, even in smaller amounts of cold water) while also enhancing its marks for environmental citizenship. As for timeframes, cause-marketing doesn't have to be “forever,” but if the public perceives causes as flighty or faddish, there is risk to credibility or – at the very least – unmined value. When brands take stands, they are acknowledging their history and establishing a vision for their future. As a result, they need to thinking about where their customers are headed, not just where they are today.



Ask what your target customers really care about. This question is, in fact, a bracket around the entire process—both a place to start and a place to land. If brand-standing is truly strategic (as opposed to merely righteous), there has to be a calculus around its value to the company today and in the future. When Nike expressed solidarity with Colin Kaepernick, the company was ultimately betting on the fact that the customers it cares most about – the customers most inspired by the brand and also most inspiring to the brand – would understand and agree, or at least respect its willingness to take that position. It was, overall, a good bet, though clearly a risky one: Nike serves a complex constellation of constituencies, including pro-athletes as well as heterogenous consumers. A company may choose to take a stand that its target customers don't care about (or worse, find objectionable) but in all cases, companies need to, at least, gauge the degree of customer alignment before committing themselves. And they would do well to consider what their employees care about too.

Routine “brand trackers” rarely incorporate the kinds of metrics relevant to the process of developing and monitoring a brand stand. There isn't enough bandwidth. Citizenship metrics must measure care to *communities*, not just to customers—a different exercise.

Hearing the Voice of the Customer on Another Soundtrack

Traditional brand research – whether tuned to the VOC or the broader marketplace – is meant to pick up signals of commercial competence. It cannot handle the added burden

of monitoring a brand's connection with a cause or, more broadly speaking, its corporate reputation. Only when pressed to consider corporations or brands as social actors, not *transactors*, can consumers help us understand where they believe brands rise to the civic occasion and where they might fall short.



From Value Proposition to *Values* Proposition

Brand stands are not for everyone—but once you take one, you need a special set of tools to assess how it's resonating with your customers. Because different brands and brand histories have unique challenges, the monitoring process needs to be custom-fit—a *coherent process that draws together all the stakeholders, using all the tools in the kit to map the relevant dimensions of permission, opportunity, and risk*. When done properly, brand stand marketing represents the strategic integration of brand value with brand values. A portfolio of techniques, including acute social listening and astute survey asking, is needed to make sure brands get it right.

About the Author



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