



January 2021

Taking a Brand Stand

A 'Head' and 'Heart' 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. 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 customers do that, too?

Who’s Leading the Charge

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*.

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 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 has no need to convey *competence*. What it needs to demonstrate is social responsibility.

Subaru, on the other hand, 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. But 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 efforts advance one of the most satisfying reasons people have for driving.

Most brands large enough to make a real difference to society by taking a stand are large public companies with diverse stakeholders to consider, but even smaller brands can help themselves as well as others by taking a stand. Some start-ups are using cause marketing to *create, not just strengthen*, brand identity. By giving socks away to people experiencing homelessness, Bombas is warming hearts first, feet second.

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. 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.

- ✓ **Start by considering the elements of your brand competence – and what forms of giving might be seen as logical extension of your commercial focus.** That may seem like a simple question but not all brand capabilities, especially operational ones, are fully visible to those on the outside. 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 will identify and prioritize grievances, but making shrewd decisions also involves creative signaling. With its support for veterans, for instance, Comcast I not just honoring *service to country* – *it is also implicitly honoring service to customers* -- an area in which Comcast has had significant remedial work to do.

- ✔ **Pay close attention to emotional claims that can elevate or fully express your value proposition.** For Citizen Brand, the lofty top rung of the “benefit ladder” is where ultimate brand *value and brand values* resides. As an early symbol of family haven, McDonald’s committed itself to support families of kids with cancer by developing Ronald McDonald House – an early and ambitious climb to the peak of brand value – and a lasting testament to its ethos.
- ✔ **Consider how ownable and how durable a particular 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.” 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 be thinking about where their customers are headed, not just where they are today. It’s tough to stay relevant but it’s just as important to project long term commitment.
- ✔ **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 Kapernick, the company was ultimately betting on the fact that the customers it cares most about would understand and agree, or at least respect its willingness to take that position. It turned out to be a good bet. A company may choose to take a stand that many of its customers don’t care about (or worse, find objectionable) but they need to understand their risks and permissions before committing themselves. And they would do well to consider what their *employees* care about too.
- ✔ **Listen to cause marketing input and feedback on a dedicated 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 when done properly, brand stand marketing epitomizes the strategic integration of brand value with brand values. Because different brands and brand histories have unique challenges, the selection and monitoring must be custom-fit—*using customized tools to map the relevant dimensions of permission, opportunity, and risk*. Acute social listening and astute survey asking are both needed to make sure brands get it right, from cause selection to course correction.

About the Author



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