

LEADERSHIP

Taking A Stand: How Brands Are Tackling Social Issues



Sallie Burnett Former Forbes Councils Member

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POST WRITTEN BY

Sallie Burnett

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Today's consumers are belief-driven. This means that, unlike traditional consumers, who may have prioritized price or convenience, they want to see brands that improve the world along with making a profit. The [2018 Edelman Earned Brand](#) study reports that this is a worldwide phenomenon. Furthermore, people are increasingly looking to brands rather than to governments to solve problems.

The Edelman study [found that](#) values-based communication is as effective as product-based communication in driving purchase intent, "and a communication focused on a brand's stand has an even greater effect on a consumer's intent to advocate for the brand than one focused on product features." Starbucks is taking a stand as a force for social good by [supporting gay marriages](#) and [partnering with universities](#) to make it possible for young adults to be able to afford to go to college.

I've been thinking, speaking and writing about customer loyalty for more than two decades. As a loyalty trend, I am seeing a rise in brands recognizing the value of engaging belief-driven buyers, both inside their loyalty programs and beyond. In this article, I highlight how brands are being rewarded for speaking up about issues that matter to the company and to customers.

What Are Social Good Campaigns?

Social good campaigns pair a brand's promotion with a prominent political or social issue. They do not shy away from courting controversy. These issues could include environmental issues and social issues, such as immigration and racism.

There are essentially two types of social good campaigns. Some use the message itself to promote their own products or services while others are primarily focused on driving awareness for the message. The latter still functions to promote the brand, though in a less direct way. Companies that take the former approach should proceed with caution.

Even as they demand that companies become more involved in social and political issues, customers are also becoming more sophisticated about their framing and purpose. If the cause is not one that the brand already has a history of promoting and that is not tied in with their products or services, consumers may react negatively.

A successful social good campaign goes far beyond raising awareness of the product. It can increase customer loyalty, drive customer engagement and bring in more millennial customers in particular. This age group is the most responsive to social good campaigns, although [people across all age groups](#) respond positively to them.

[The New York Times](#) increased its subscription base with a campaign that reminded consumers that "the truth is worth it." The campaign, which was promoted on multiple platforms, spoke to consumers who wanted to remain informed and was intimately connected with the brand's mission.

On the other hand, the British clothing brand [Jigsaw](#) successfully promoted a message of diversity in response to anti-foreign sentiment in the United Kingdom that was not a part of its core mission but which resonated with many consumers all the same.

Better Futures, Better Sales

An [Axios/Harris poll](#) found that consumers are increasingly looking to brands to promise a brighter future. Many companies that have been in the marketplace for decades are finding themselves facing competition from younger, purpose-driven companies that are committed to a better world.

Brands that are viewed as old-school corporate giants, unconcerned with the greater good, may need to reposition themselves as being just as concerned with social good. [Unilever](#), [Procter & Gamble](#) and [PepsiCo](#), for example, are promoting their use of recyclable packaging while [Columbia](#), [Patagonia](#) and other companies with an outdoor focus are pressing for more sustainability and environmentally-friendly initiatives.

While customers want brands to speak up on controversial issues, not every successful campaign has to tackle divisive topics. At the South by Southwest festival in Austin, a [partnership between the](#)

Red Cross and HBO promoted both a blood drive and the new season of *Game of Thrones*. Attendees were invited to reflect on the blood sacrifices of their favorite *Game of Thrones* characters with the participation of paid actors and the opportunity to take a walking tour. While many people might not immediately think of pairing the two, the similar messages of sacrifice for others raised awareness of both the need for blood and the TV show.

The reasons why brands may want to take a stand are many, but one is simply that it is good for business. A [study by Unilever](#) found that one-third of consumers base their purchases on a company's social and environmental performance. More than three-fourths of Americans say they feel better when they buy products that are sustainably produced.

Brands that are thinking about taking a stand need to be strategic and authentically support causes that have a strong connection to the brand's value and message. It is critical that brands align with the social, environmental or political issues that match how consumers and stakeholders view the brand. When crafting the message, provide intrinsic value by inspiring, educating and enlightening your customers on why the issue is important to the brand.

The days of a company's only responsibility being to sell a product and make a profit are over. Brands with a social cause are growing by leaps and bounds and representing a greater share of the market. Today's customers are turning to brands in droves to solve the problems they no longer believe governments can tackle. And companies that reward that faith will see a leap in their bottom line.

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Sallie Burnett

Sallie Burnett is a loyalty consultant, keynote speaker and Founder of [Customer Insight Group](#). 25 years of customer loyalty experience.

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