

MARKETING

Marketing in the Age of Resistance

by [Christine Alemany](#)

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Modern consumers are as politically and socially conscious as ever. While some brands respond out of fear of alienating sects of their audience, a recent Morning Consult study found that merely saying the “right things” or “standing in solidarity” no longer cut it with consumers. They want the brands they support to back up those platitudes with action.

At the moment — with protests against racial injustice continuing across the globe — companies face increased pressure to denounce discrimination publicly and solidify their commitments to diversity and inclusion. We have recently seen companies respond to this demand in a variety of ways.

After George Floyd’s death, some brands posted brief messages of support and solidarity on social media, while others launched full-scale multichannel marketing campaigns. Regardless of the approach, companies should proceed with care when commenting on current events — especially when they involve social justice or politically polarizing topics.

Throughout the digital age, businesses have amassed massive paper trails on their websites and social media accounts. With a small amount of legwork, consumers can easily comb through a company's receipts to see which brands are offering lip service and which ones genuinely care. Any inauthentic or inaccurate statements about your commitment to diversity or equal rights can quickly be debunked, ridiculed, and shared virally across the internet.

Be About It Instead of Just Talking About It

Authenticity in marketing has always been a best practice, but it becomes even more crucial in this time of social unrest and Covid-19. Campaigns about current events and social issues leave companies vulnerable to a different and deeper level of scrutiny.

For example, in response to the coronavirus pandemic, Amazon released a commercial that thanked its "heroic" employees and described the company's dedication to keeping them healthy and safe. The ad seemed heartfelt, but it became clear that the company was not "walking the walk" when coupled with Amazon's recent employee strikes over workplace safety concerns.

Similarly, the NFL continues to struggle to authentically address racial injustice in America. For the past month, the league has been outspoken on social media about the horrors of systemic racism and police violence. But two short years ago, the NFL punished players for kneeling during the national anthem in protest of these same issues. Naturally, plenty of people have scrutinized their inconsistent stance.

This is not a time for companies to share generic, hollow, or hypocritical sentiments. Doing so can ring inauthentic and like a publicity stunt instead of a genuine attempt at contributing to the conversation. Instead, it is a time to be humble, own up to any mistakes, and express a desire to grow. This level of humility and authenticity is what consumers want to see right now, and it will help companies continue to build trust over the long run.

Companies that acknowledge what is going on in the world, and that honestly want to improving things, strike the right chord with their customers. Companies that practice corporate social responsibility, for instance, can attribute 40% of their public reputation to that CSR work.

But authenticity can devolve into just lip service that companies hope will make them look good without having to do anything. I have seen it happen that way, and I understand the adverse effects it can have. To help brands maintain their campaigns' authenticity and effectiveness during times of unrest, here are four tips I have seen work:

Step beyond your company's perspective. Marketing teams often craft campaigns in a vacuum. When developing their messaging and imagery, they rely heavily on internal expertise and perspectives because they know their products better than any outsider would. However, topics like global health and racial injustice likely fall outside of the average marketing team's purview. When attempting to comment on these sensitive topics, incorporate perspectives from outside experts to maintain the thoughtfulness and sincerity of your messaging.

Connect with brand leaders who have also had to adapt or overhaul their messaging and tactics during uncertain times. They usually have insights that can put the challenges you're facing into perspective and help you avoid unexpected struggles in the future. In addition, pick the brain of your target audience to learn about what they want

to hear and what will not work for them. These outsiders can hold a mirror up to your company, and allow you to see things more clearly.

For marketing teams, turning to people outside the organization can also illuminate when groupthink is leading them astray. When I worked at Dell, for example, the company decided to ramp up its marketing efforts toward women. I was asked to join an internal task force to help create these campaigns, but I quickly recused myself from the situation once I realized the CMO — who happened to be a woman — was intent on pushing stereotypical messaging, emphasizing topics like fashion and diet. She and her team would not listen to people outside of the task force that voiced concerns and warned her about this ill-conceived messaging built on outdated tropes. After the campaign went live, she ended up losing her job because of the ensuing public backlash over the campaign's content.

Listen, process, and validate. When customers or employees voice concerns about your company's response to Covid-19, racial injustice, or other current events, do more than listen to their feedback — work to process it critically. Pay close attention to the specific terminology

they use and take it at face value. Do not try to read between the lines or defensively make assumptions about the way they feel. If you do, you are more likely to inject your biases and preconceptions into the mix. When crafting your response, mirror their phrasing and word choices to validate their concerns and show that you understand.

Take the case of what recently happened at Starbucks. The company faced significant backlash after consumers learned the retailer would not allow employees to wear any attire that said “Black Lives Matter.” This policy appeared to contradict previous statements made by the company on antiracism and inclusion. Starbucks validated consumer concerns when they spoke out against the hypocrisy, and the brand recently announced it would manufacture and distribute 250,000 “Black Lives Matter” shirts to its employees. While the move from some companies would be to dig in and not back down from such a public display, I think Starbucks deciding not to dig its heels in here was the right move. By acknowledging the hypocrisy and vowing to do better, it saved face and allowed the company to start somewhat anew.

Apologize without caveats or explanations. Do not underestimate the power of a sincere apology — even if the transgression occurred decades ago. Lucasfilm, for example, first came under fire in 1999 after creating Jar Jar Binks, a character many viewers believed to embody racist stereotypes. George Lucas has persistently denied any racist intent over the years, and he has refused to apologize for creating such a controversial character. With Jar Jar Binks back in the news recently, due to questions about the character’s appearing in an upcoming “Star Wars” TV project, Lucas has another opportunity to offer a sincere apology once and for all.

Expressing genuine contrition does not include caveats or explanations, and it should not take a rotation in the news cycle to spark remorse. It accepts fault and places the onus on the brand rather than the people who feel offended. Even if you do not immediately understand or agree with the complaints against your company, take time to self-reflect and determine why an apology might be necessary.

If you decide to express remorse publicly, admit your lack of understanding while explaining how you plan to educate yourself. Provide follow-up statements as you learn, evolve,

and implement changes.

Do not make a one-off statement. We have established that apologies are not enough in today's age. With "cancel culture" as pervasive as it is, a one-time reaction is as good as letting an issue get ahead of you. Instead, treat apologies or mea culpas as the first steps of an ongoing dialogue designed to bring about thoughtful and meaningful progress.

After you finish owning up to the issue and better educating yourself, demonstrate how you are continuing to grow and leave that development open. Look at household names like Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben's, Cream of Wheat, Mrs.

Butterworth's, and Eskimo Pie — today, these brands are taking a (much needed) step forward by revisiting their divisive and antiquated trademark packaging. While, in a better world, this would have happened many years ago, it does show that they are trying to grow and create more inclusive products.

What is powerful about the actions those brands are taking is that they are just that: actions. Statements without actionable follow-through are just hot air. In the best case

scenario, they are ignored. In the worst case, your brand will face backlash and be worse off than if you stayed silent. Take the next logical step that shows that you can “walk the walk.”

Following through doesn't have to be complicated or expensive: If you value your essential workers, give them an hourly boost for facing increased hazardous conditions. If you value the environment, plant a tree. If you support your local community, give each employee paid time off to volunteer at their favorite charities. If you are invested in inclusion and improving racial equality, hire and recruit candidates from underrepresented communities. Make these gestures routine instead of opportunistic to show that you are invested in bringing about real change.

Your company might not get it right 100% of the time, but sticking to your core values, communicating with care, and displaying a willingness to reevaluate your point of view will enable you to build trust with consumers while learning and growing alongside them.

Christine Alemany is the CEO at TBGA. She has a passion for helping emerging companies grow and scale. Christine has more than 20 years of experience reinvigorating brands, building demand generation programs, and launching products for startups and Fortune 500 companies. In addition to her work at TBGA, she advises startups through Columbia Business School's Entrepreneurial Sounding Board and is a teaching fellow at the NASDAQ Entrepreneurial Center.

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Kathy Fleming 6 hours ago

So if you allow an employee to wear any t-shirt that contains a heart-felt political stance, right or left, don't you then set yourself up to need to treat employees with opposing views the same way?

Also, do those customers who reject the NFL today, do so because of inconsistency, or because they don't enjoy participating in the continual passing of judgement on each other day in and day out? Fatigue.

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