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Woke washing: what happens when marketing communications don't match corporate practice

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A Nike ad campaign billboard features NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick. EPA/Alba Vigaray, CC BY-ND

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Brand activism has become the new marketing tactic of choice, and a brand's stance on societal and political issues can offer a differentiating factor in a fast-paced corporate marketplace.

Historically brands have not engaged in social and political conversations for fear of potentially alienating customers, but our current research shows savvy brands are recognising that marketing budget spent on good causes can have the greatest reach and impact.

However, while consumers expect big brands to take a stand, they may not believe them when they do.

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Courting controversy

Consider the recent controversial Nike advertisement featuring NFL football player Colin Kaepernick, the first athlete not to stand for the US national anthem. Nike's message delivered by Kaepernick was "believe in something even if it means risking everything". The ad triggered a boycott of Nike goods, but also earned \$6 billion for the company and raised brand awareness among Nike's target demographic.

As brands engage in more corporate social activism, however, the motives driving these actions are increasingly scrutinised. Crossing the line into appropriation may get brands into trouble.

Jumping on the bandwagon may be equally controversial for brands. When Chevrolet, Virgin and Ben & Jerry's all took a stance on marriage equality, for instance, the issue became linked with so many companies that marriage equality was seen as a marketing tool instead of authentic brand activism.

Read more: What's behind the current wave of 'corporate activism'?

Expected but not authentic

When asked about the recent Nike advertisement featuring Kaepernick, 60% of respondents in this research study indicated they felt positively about Nike after viewing the advertisement. Consumers increasingly expect brands to take a stand and see it as a brand's duty or responsibility. Consumers we talked to said brands have the power to make a difference.

Of those who felt positively about the advertisement, 73% of respondents indicated this was an appropriate topic for Nike to engage in. Yet importantly, only 45% indicated they felt Nike had a genuine commitment to these values.

This is surprising. Brands can be perceived as being appropriate in their messaging around social and political causes, and yet not authentic. True brand equity for activism marketing thus hinges on whether or not the brand engages in practices that match its message.

Activism vs genuine practice

This research inspired the creation of a brand activism typology. The purpose of the typology is to examine the alignment between the degree of activism marketing (high vs low) with the degree of authentic practices (high vs low).

These dimensions represent the degree of brand practice that authentically aligns with social causes versus the degree of brand marketing and promotion around social causes. In other words, this approach measures whether brands are practising what they preach.

The resulting typology reveals when brands are more likely to be perceived as “woke washing” - inauthentic in their marketing, as their practices may not clearly align with their messaging. Some brands have neither messaging nor practices that are pro-social. Some have both high authenticity of practices as well as clear messaging around their practices and support for social causes. For these brands, expectations and perceptions match, and they are “honestly not woke” or “honestly woke” brands respectively.

Some brands, however, have authentic social engagement practices yet do not take many steps to market and position themselves as being corporate social activists. These “woke but silent” brands have an opportunity to use marketing to highlight authentic practices. Other brands have unclear or indeterminate records of social cause practices even though they use social activism marketing to position their brands in the marketplace, referred to as “woke washing”.

No room for neutrality

In today’s post-modern culture, corporate neutrality has been subject to criticism. **Remaining ambivalent on controversial issues** is now more of a failure than an asset, especially in the eyes of certain consumer groups. Yet, how can brands walk the line between consumer expectations and perceptions of inauthenticity?

Our initial findings show brands should be genuine, relevant to their core purpose or brand promise, and ensure their practices support their communications. Marketing communications and campaigns that centre on long-term brand engagement make the most sense to consumers.

Companies seeking to embrace corporate social activism must also have patience. Be in it for the long haul, and brands might just find customer support in the connected world.



Colin Kaepernick New Zealand stories

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