

Social Media: Should your brand take a stand?

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Should your brand stand for something?

It's easy to mistake this as a simple question. Of course, we want our brands to stand for something.

However, as we venture beyond the safe confines of product and industry conversations, broader sociological, cultural and political implications can present a challenge.

Sometimes it's easier not to take a stand. Strong beliefs give our brands sharp edges that we naturally feel we need to round out.

Those with a balance-sheet-first mind-set often point out here that taking a stance in these politically and socially charged times gives 50 percent of the population a reason not to buy what you're selling. That's why it's become accepted that politics and social issues are a third rail in business. Something to avoid at all costs.

On the other hand, modern consumers are overwhelmed with thousands of brand impressions each day. We have a clutter problem. Consumers today aren't just looking for brands to purchase from — especially the coveted millennial demographic.

They're looking for communities to be a part of. Brands worth belonging to are the ones that appeal to us

emotionally. That stand for something.

It's a delicate balance. Just what should your brand stand for and when?

Know Who You Are, Know Who Your Customers Are

Consumers aren't the only ones overwhelmed. With an ever-evolving digital ecosystem, marketers have trouble keeping up, too.

Many resort to "checklist marketing" — checking off social networks and content like arbitrary items on a checklist. Worse still, under these harried conditions, we get lazy with our brand building.

Lee Clow, the adman responsible for Apple's iconic "1984" ad, said that, "The reality of the new media world is that if your brand does not have a belief, if it does not have a soul and does not correctly architect its messages everywhere it touches consumers, it can become irrelevant. It can be ignored, or even become a focal point for online contempt."

In short, you have to be something before you can build something.

"Brands that we look to, that are charismatic, know their audience. They know who they are," as Carla Johnson of Type A Communications recently shared in a podcast interview.

Who are you? More importantly, who do you serve? What matters most to them?

If you know who you are, you can start to look at opportunities for social and even political alignment.

Look for Alignment

In September 2014, CVS Pharmacy turned a lot of heads by announcing that the chain no longer would sell cigarettes.

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"By eliminating the sale of cigarettes and tobacco products in our stores, we can make a difference in the health of all Americans," CVS CEO Larry Merlo said when the ban took effect. Health is at the very heart of the CVS brand.

Thinx makes period-proof underwear. In addition to adopting an authentic, transparent brand voice on what some consider a taboo topic, Thinx regularly shares updates on women's health issues and feminism in their email newsletter.

A recent edition featured a Texas judge ruling that doctors could refuse care on grounds of religious freedom, along with a summary of those not performing at the Trump inauguration. Feminism and women's health are the cornerstones of the Thinx brand.

Tea collection is a children's clothing company with globally inspired designs. Following the recent election, they sent an impassioned email to their customers expressing concerns on the President Trump's rhetoric: "We want to open up the world for all children — to celebrate the common humanity that we share with all people no matter the color of our skin or the nationality of our birth."

A diverse, global perspective is at the core of the Tea brand.

As Denise Lee Yohn says in her book, “What Great Brands Do,” you have to ask yourself, “What business are you really in?”

When you know who you are and, more important, who your audience is, you can look for alignment in the social and political issues that mean the most to them.

A brand that stands for something ultimately stands out, and isn't that what we're all looking to do?

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