

CISION®

**SHOULD YOUR BRAND
TAKE A STAND?**





Brands come to PR and communications professionals to help with any number of issues they don't have the expertise or bandwidth to tackle on their own. The need for expertise in brand communications has only increased in recent weeks as we collectively navigate appropriate, necessary responses to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the recent protests related to police violence and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Consumers increasingly want to buy from brands they feel reflect their personal values, and that can be difficult for brands who must decide what they should take a public stand on and when. Where once communications professionals would have recommended neutrality, now, even weeks later, things have shifted. Brands are expected to take a stand.

Know your audience

Most things come back to that adage: Know your audience. You need to know if the target audience for the brand you're working with falls under the umbrella of consumers who want to buy from brands they share values with, or if they fall under the umbrella of those who would rather a brand “stick to sports”, so to say.

In recent weeks, taking the latter stance can be interpreted from a brand's silence—and therefore their implied interest in maintaining the status quo.

What do the stats say?

64% of surveyed global consumers base decisions on which brands to purchase from or boycott based on political or social leanings, according to the [2018 Edelman Earned Brand study](#).

In the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer, 53% of consumers expect brands to get involved in at least one social issue that is not directly related to their business, though companies are often perceived as falling short:

- 56% of people say brands overuse social issues as marketing ploys
- 21% say they know from personal experience that their chosen brands keep the best interests of society in mind (2019 Edelman Trust Barometer, via [Ad Age](#))

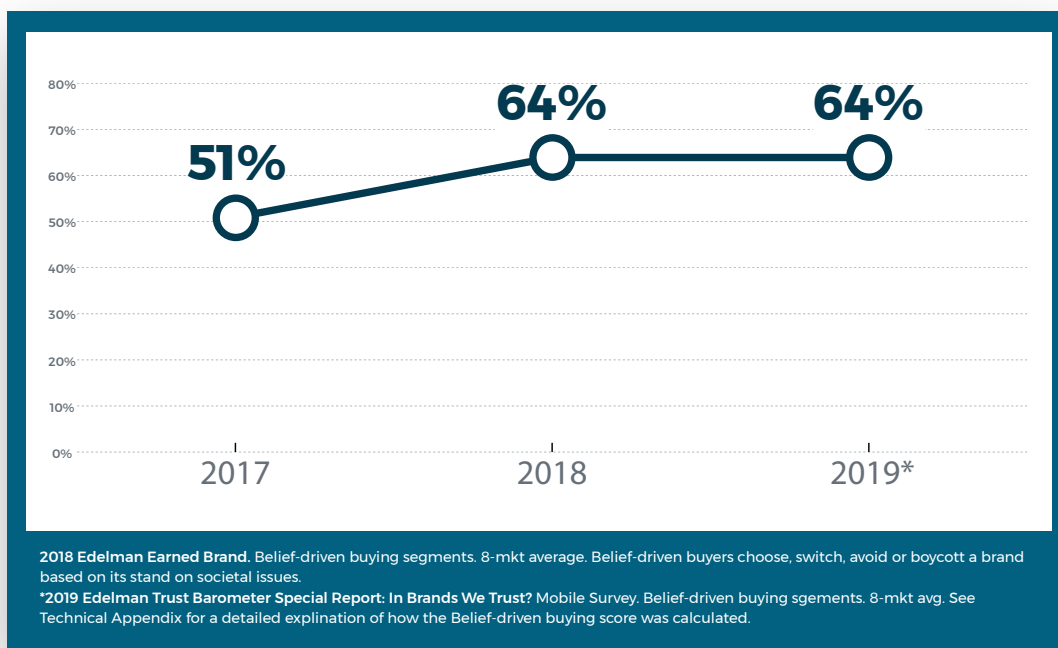


Brands need to be smart about how they go about doing this; it can backfire if it's seen as trying to manipulate their audience, especially in the current environment. Brands who may even be completely sincere in their recent declarations for social change will be challenged to provide actionable steps they plan to take to aid in that change, and their past records of inaction or inconsistent or opposite action will be highlighted. (See [the Edelman Special Report on Brand Trust in 2020](#) for more.)

"My purchase of products each week makes more of a difference than my vote every four years in the broader debate on issues such as tolerance, environment and education," Richard Edelman writes in *The Next Giant Step*, an essay he wrote to accompany the release of the 2019 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report. *"I want brands to stand with me."*

— [5 key takeaways from the 2019 Edelman brand trust survey](#)

The [2020 Edelman Trust Barometer](#) showed the increase in belief-driven consumers from last year held steady; consumers want brands to act.



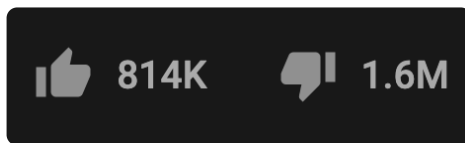
Their [follow-up spring 2020 survey](#) on trust and the novel coronavirus pandemic showed a record increase in trust in all institutions, likely due to a “trust bubble” that emerged in the first uncertain weeks around COVID-19. It also showed that CEOs had failed to demonstrate expected public leadership as the face of their brands. If you’re working with a CEO on a statement for a brand it’s important to keep the general public perception around them in mind, especially now.

And don't forget to really focus on your specific audience and act based on that information: [The 2020 Consumer Culture Report from 5WPR](#) showed that 83% of millennials, for example, feel strongly the brands they buy from should align with their values, and 76% want to see CEOs actively using their platform to address important social issues.

Other target audiences will feel differently.

What are some examples?

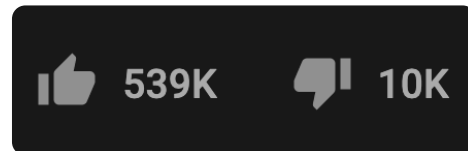
In the pre-COVID era, [Gillette ran a Super Bowl ad in 2019](#) that many saw as controversial. How did it perform? You can find statistics around social performance, but that doesn't tell us who they were talking to.



“By targeting the campaign at Gen Z, per BrandTotal, Gillette might resonate with younger consumers who are known for being more inclusive and shunning outdated stereotypes, as opposed to older men, who might take greater offense at the messaging.”

— [Marketing Dive](#)

And this brings up an interesting phenomenon: other, unrelated brands using one brand's declared stance on a social issue to declare or reiterate their own. In this case, [Egard Watches put out a response ad to Gillette](#), aimed at an entirely different audience.



The risk in this strategy is obvious; alienating your customer base or target audience of existing and potential customers could be a huge hit for a brand's bottom line. If it's really off-base, it could even snowball into a crisis comms situation.

But if a brand really knows their audience- or is willing to do the work to get to know them- and knows they want to see something like this from the brands they buy from, this strategy can have a huge payoff. It's the PR and comms professional's job to lead them through this process and ensure it's the right move for a brand at the right time.

It's impossible to predict perfect timing, but part of learning about- then keeping tabs on- an audience means listening to wider industry conversations that should inform timing for launching a campaign built around this strategy.

In the past few weeks, many PR and comms professionals now say their strategy has shifted and it's time for brands to take a

stand. But that stand absolutely must be an authentic one, and if past brand actions don't match it, or if a change in future actions isn't properly communicated, brands will be called out for it.

In the wake of recent events, [Ben & Jerry's released incredibly strong messaging](#) backed by years of activism, while other brands' actions resulted in [disappointing public missteps](#). While not all companies can be as bold and outspoken as Ben & Jerry's, it's apparent that there's an increase in

customers' desire for brands to take a stand. It's important to listen to your customers and monitor their requests.

As always, the best thing a brand can do is **be honest**: If you're not where you want to be—where society and your target audience want you to be—admit that and put together concrete actions for how you're going to get there.



The bottom line?

There are always risks involved in a brand making a public statement around societal and social issues, but equivalent– and potentially more damaging– risks are in place for those who choose to remain silent, particularly if that silence is read by the public as support for existing systemic injustices.

Taking a stand as a brand absolutely must be done in a thoughtful and authentic way, or it stands to backfire. Speak from core values and be prepared to back them up with concrete actions beyond just the weeks to come.

And if your brand doesn't have strong core values? It's time to sit down with the executive team and commit to a better future, internally and externally. Start by admitting you have more work to do.

ABOUT CISION

Cision is a leading global provider of earned media software and services to public relations and marketing communications professionals. Cision's software allows users to identify key influencers, craft and distribute strategic content, and measure meaningful impact. Cision has over 4,800 employees with offices in 24 countries throughout the Americas, EMEA, and APAC. For more information about Cision's award-winning products and services, including the Cision Communications Cloud®, visit www.cision.ca and follow Cision on Twitter @CisionCA. To support PR and communications professionals during this difficult time, Cision has compiled these [free Resources for COVID-19 Communications](#).



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