

In 2004 Douglas Holt argued that brands should be activists, leading culture. Why?

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Introduction

The term 'brand activism' is used when a brand is taking a stand on a social, environmental, economic, or political issue to make a positive impact. The concept of brand activism is relatively new and emerged along with the loss of efficiency of using only brand positioning to persuade customers. According to Eldeman's study (2018), one in two customers is a belief-driven buyer. This fact confirms that brands can drive sales and expand their reach and influence (Anderson S., 2019). Furthermore, more than 50% of questioned people responded that they believe brands have more impact on solving social issues than governments. (Eldeman, 2018)

The aims of this essay are: to discuss why brands should take a stand; to evaluate the effectiveness of such a decision; and to consider the pros and cons of brands being activists, leading and shaping culture.

Brand Activism

The publication 'How Brands Become Icons: The Principle of Cultural Branding' written by Douglas Holt (2004) argues that iconic brands are built by cultural activists and all brands should be involved in activism and leading culture in their own interest to become successful. To create an iconic brand, it is necessary to reinvent a marketing function from assembling knowledge of individual customers to gathering cultural knowledge. The main aim of customer knowledge is to focus on a social change impacting a society, understanding what gives people meaning, and how to examine the role of social categories of class, race, or gender. (Emory Marketing Institute, 2004) Successful Brand Activism must be authentic, which means that all messages match a brand's purpose, and lack pure commercial intentions.

Using corporate social responsibility (CSR) as a Public Relations and Marketing tool is effective as long as a brand is obviously interested in a cause. If customers find out the aim of the company is only to generate PR, they will see that the brand is just trying to take an advantage of the situation. There is a thin border between the commercial interest to drive sales and improve PR of a brand and sincere interest in taking a stand on a socio-political issue, that meets brand's purpose and matters to the target audience they are trying to reach. (Rehkopf, F., 2018)

Pros of Brand Activism

According to Brand Ambition (ND), becoming known for taking a stand on a social issue can help to build better distinction from other brands than relying on differences in product benefits. Especially in product categories where it is problematic to differentiate. Furthermore, a success of a social campaign can help to gain an association with a purpose, set of values, and messages that can help the brand to be linked with 'social good' and build trust between them and customers (Litsa T., 2018). The positive relationship and striving to be a meaningful brand are powerful tools to meet a brand's objectives and reach a wider audience. Nowadays, only brand positioning is not enough to engage younger demographics anymore. Millennials expect brands to have a sense of purpose, be actively involved in social issues, and appeal to making a difference (Litsa T., 2018). As stated by Cone Communication Research (2015), 87 % of millennials would rather buy a product with environmental or social benefit and 95 % would switch a brand to the one supporting a good cause. If a brand chooses a right cause to support, and furthermore take a political stance, it helps to add an important meaning to the brand and gain necessary loyalty and relationship among customers who share the same interests, values, and support the same cause as the brand (Rehkopf, F., 2018).

Moreover, according to Loyalty Science Lab (2020), Brand Activism is not only affecting outer brand image but also an inner environment. By taking a stand for a credible cause, the meaning and purpose of work can rally the support, unity, and interest of workers. Especially among millennial employees, who are driven by deep care about social issues. So-called social good is now becoming more important to an increasingly interested society in controversial worldwide issues such as racism - Black Lives Matter, equality, climate crisis, or #MeToo movement. Thus, brands are refocusing on doing social good (Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., Kemper, J.A., 2020).

Cons of Brand Activism

In contrast, Brand Activism has multiple perils and disadvantages. One of the main mistakes brands should prevent is 'Woke Washing'. As stated by Venice Diplomatic Society (2019) the definition of the term is that brands are using Brand Activism to associate themselves with an activist message to an issue just to make more profit without meeting the objectives of a brand and therefore making a difference. In this case, a brand's marketing strategy becomes inauthentic and criticised by many. 47 % of customers will leave the brand for a while if they are not convinced and satisfied with the current position on the market, and 17 % will permanently cut the brand off and never purchase their products again. (Barrell, 2018) To avoid losing customers and harming the reputation, brands should spend more time on research and wisely choose a credible cause to support. Such behaviour prevents

misleading customers with their claims. (Cullen, ND) Worldwide known 'Woke Washing' example is when despite using Colin Kaepernick as a motive of their advertisements, Nike continued the sponsoring of the NFL teams that refused Kaepernick after kneeling as a Black Lives Matter protester during the game. (Vredenburg J., Kapitan S., Spry A., Kemper A. J.)

However, stated by Jessica Vredenburg (2020), becoming Brand Activists in the socio-political sphere is challenging and all motives chosen by brands are increasingly examined. Negative attributions can damage business returns or a brand's reputation in general. To summarize, customers may not believe that brands are being genuine and straight when they engage in Brand Activism. 56 % of buyers indicated that many brands are using socio-political issues mainly as a marketing ploy to just sell more of their products. Although, 65 % of respondents expect brands to take a stand on social issues.

Brands should also consider the possibility of internal divide after taking a stand. We can often see controversial socio-political issues that are risky to focus on due to the chance to receive more negative than positive feedback. Not only customers are most likely to divide into two groups, but it can also cause choosing a side of employees within the company. (Loyalty Science Lab, 2020)

Comparison of successful and unsuccessful brand activism

Just after nine days, Airbnb reacted to President Trump signing the order to temporarily close the borders of America to refugees in 2018. The company aired a perfectly timed advertisement called "We accept" during Super Bowl spot in response to the situation. The video spot showed people of different ethnicities alongside the words: "We believe no matter who you are, where you're from, who you love or who you worship, we all belong. The world is more beautiful the more you accept." The ad became one of the most-talked and praised Super Bowl ads of the year 2018. Furthermore, it helped the company to associate themselves with positioning as supporters of the fight for equality. (Gilliland, 2021) The lack of any corporate messages or selling points added credibility to the company, additionally with the donation of 4 million dollars to the International Rescue Committee over the next four years. (Creative Group, 2017) Airbnb was previously fighting against racism in the previous campaign and also by showing their own diversity numbers of employees online, they proved the "WeAccept" campaign met their values and purpose with genuine intentions. (Beer, J., 2017) Overall; 33 000 tweets were generated while the first half of the game with 85 % of positive feedback; 90 000 shares were made; and there was a 13% increase in site visitors in the US and Canada.

In comparison, the campaign 'Live for Now' by Pepsi was a fatal failure. After the Black Lives Matter protests, the company was simply trying to send a global message of peace, unity, and support, but the infamous campaign received negative feedback and hate. The main problem with the ad is how the serious movement was portrayed as "cheerful" and full of smiling demonstrators who seem to be more at a festival than protesting. Anyone is showing any glimpse of being upset or angry. (Smith, 2018) The daughter of Martin Luther King Bernice responded to the ad on Twitter (2017): "If only Daddy would have known about the power of Pepsi." Along with her, people also criticised the commercial aspects of capitalism behind the advertising. @BlakeDontCrack (2017) tweeted that the brand is trying to make a profit even from people losing their lives.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Brand Activism is a powerful tool to associate a brand with an issue that meets its values and purpose. Such association enables customers to believe in the 'social good' of the company and are more like to purchase from the brand repeatedly.

However, Brand Activism comes with multiple problematic aspects that may occur. Some brands are taking a stand on socio-political issue just for the purpose of profit without the unadulterated aim to make a difference or spread the awareness about an issue. In this case, a brand is violating its own reputation and causing the loss of existing and potential supporters and customers.

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