



Fending Off the Next Social Media Blitz

By Ryan Baum

Hard social media age realities mean companies had better anchor in their truest core values—or incur the wrath of stakeholders. This article outlines how to identify your purpose and values and use them as a bulwark against controversy.

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Recent white-hot controversies have made it clear that companies can't simply explain their way out of a values conflict with their own customers and employees. That means they need to anchor their public identity in their core beliefs and principles for consistency and authenticity.

No organization that truly knows itself and its stakeholders needs to waver in the face of controversy. Responses become automatic.

But since not every company can easily identify its authentic principles or its most sacred core values, there's work to be done. The best place for a company's senior management team to start is with a long look in the mirror. That can allow you to uncover your company's purpose as something that's deeply authentic to your people's beliefs.

Articulate and activate your purpose

There's a reason why any specific set of human beings all end up at the same company. It may not be articulated or understood explicitly, but it's there. Sure, it could be because you offer the best pay and benefits, but in many cases it's bigger than that—especially if someone has been at the company for more than five years.

Oftentimes that reason is some sort of shared belief about how the world should work. Look inward to your people. Do the cultural archeology work to uncover what that reason is. Then use it as a guiding light to determine what the team authentically cares about. That can be a filter in deciding what issues are actually right to take a stand on. Uncover it and state it!

Once you articulate a purpose, it's only useful if you can start building it into the decision making processes at the company. There are rigorous ways to do that, but one simple action can be to start ending all of your meetings by asking the question, how does what we decided here today resonate, violate or not apply to our articulated purpose?

Then only act on the things that resonate. It's relatively easy to avoid action on things that violate your purpose. But you also need to not take action on things that don't apply.

For example, if you're all about financial equity and access, it probably doesn't make sense for you to suddenly step into issues of environmental sustainability. You can support environmental action personally if you personally care about that, but it isn't authentic to what the organization stands for, it's probably a distraction from the clarity and consistency of what the company is trying to do in the world.

Try to sell to everyone, end up selling to no one

But not every company can look internally and figure out their purpose. If doing so doesn't work, look externally and focus on what the people who you serve care about.

Large companies often say their products and offerings are “for everyone.” But a desire to build something for everyone, while well-intentioned, often creates a generic point of view that appeals to no one.

It's hard for folks inside large organizations who are operating at scale to remember that before something is for everyone, it's for someone. It's classic adoption theory: Facebook starts as a way for Harvard kids to meet each other. Then it scales to other Ivy Leaguers and then other colleges and then eventually even your grandmother wants to join the club.

Mass appeal actually does not come from trying to please or design for everyone. Mass appeal comes from consistently expressing a clear point of view that more and more people buy into over time. Consider that the #1 beer in the USA is now Modelo! That started with a pretty clear POV of who the product was trying to serve.

Align with your North Star customer—and be consistent

Being for everyone means you will “blow with where the wind goes” and seems inauthentic rather than having an organizational North Star—a group of customers that are aligned with and well-served by your company's purpose.

And then care about what this North Star customer set cares about. What they really care about in their broader lives is not generally—surprise!—interacting with your product. Their true beliefs and passions can serve as the basis for determining what types of stands you choose to take in the world.

And then be consistent—which of course will allow you to be true to your core values. By grounding your company this way, you can always draw on what is

critical and real in your branding and advertising work. An old advertising aphorism states that “the basis of every great brand is truth,” so a company’s founding principles should give copywriters what they need for generations to come.

Companies with strong ethical and moral foundations based on their mission and stakeholder beliefs will also be less vulnerable to social media attacks. When a response is either rendered unnecessary by the confidence of faithful customers, or is delivered with an unblinking, steady gaze because of the implicit support of employees, attackers will think twice and three times before launching the next fusillade.

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