

# Should Brands Get Political?

March 14, 2017



By Michael J. McDermott

At least six major brands ran ads during Super Bowl LI that addressed political or social issues such as immigration and gender equality. At an average cost of \$5 million per 30-second spot, those were some pretty expensive statements to make. Budweiser, Airbnb, 84 Lumber, Google Home, Audi, and Coca-Cola might have been lauded or jeered, depending on one's personal point of view, for delivering those messages, but did the brands get their money's worth?

It's a difficult question to answer, and it raises even more questions about if and when brands should speak out about policies or proposed laws, the challenges involved in doing so, and the risks of not speaking up on issues that are important to their customer base.

On a pragmatic marketing level, there is also the question of whether issue-oriented spots provide a worthwhile return on investment. The weekend after Super Bowl LI, ***Saturday Night Live*** ran a skit depicting a fictitious ad pitch session for Cheetos that lampooned the

agencies that create activist ads and the marketing managers who buy them. It was exaggerated and satirical, of course, but it likely had a lot of marketing folks talking about the underlying issues that Monday.

"When it comes to making public statements or actions about policies or laws, it's always important to connect it back to your brand purpose, mission, and values," suggests Dustin Longstreth, chief marketing and strategy officer at brand agency CBX. "Public statements rooted in a clearly understood and demonstrated brand culture will be received as authentic, whether people agree with the statement itself or not."

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That's exactly the approach embraced by outdoor apparel marketer Patagonia, which has a long history of activism, but always on behalf of causes closely aligned with its brand DNA. "For us, when we speak out about issues, it's not about politics, it's about the values we hold dear," says Corley Kenna, director of global communications and public relations at Patagonia. "We've been speaking out about issues we care about — which are those having to do with our planet — really, since the company was founded. We feel compelled to respond when we believe that environmental issues are under threat or are being taken for granted, and that's how we make the decision on when to speak out."

Authenticity is a key tenet of Patagonia's strategy, and it's demonstrated by the brand's willingness to take action on important issues, not just talk about them. "Right now, we find ourselves in the middle of a very interesting and important conversation about public land," Kenna relates. "We are very much in the spotlight because we have said directly to the governor of Utah that if he doesn't stand up for public lands — and specifically for the Bear Ears National Monument — then we will not participate in the biggest trade show in the state," Kenna says, referring to July's Outdoor Retailer show.

So, **is it always a good idea for a brand to take a public stand on issues it considers**

 **important?** It depends. A majority of Americans (67 percent) do not think that brands and companies should publicly comment on politics, according to research conducted by **CivicScience**, a provider of marketing intelligence solutions. But there are significant exceptions related to target audience and brand identity. For example, those under the age of 18 are 84 percent more likely to say that brands should publicly comment on politics, and Millennials are 25 percent more likely to say the same. Baby Boomers, on the other hand, are 20 percent more likely to take the opposite position. An individual's view of a particular brand also plays a role. For instance, among consumers with a favorable view of Beats by Dr. Dre, 56 percent think brands and companies should publicly comment on politics, double the percentage of those with an unfavorable view of the brand.

Figuring out if and when a brand should take a public stance on a political issue or a proposed law requires careful analysis, says Mark Mayer, a former Kraft Foods brand manager who is now a clinical assistant professor of marketing at Indiana University's Kelley School of Business. "Brand equity largely exists in consumers' minds. It's not something that is simply created and pushed at consumers, but rather it is largely made up of consumers' knowledge, experiences, associations, and other dynamics, which aren't static but rather change over time. So if this protest or statement or other stance fits with consumers' attitudes — and fits with the brand's personality and image — then there probably won't be a negative issue, and such actions might even be very positive in effect," he says.

"It's tempting to jump on an issue that's important and on-trend, but it's essential to have credibility before making a statement."

— Bill Gullan, president at Finch Brands

These are hard decisions to make, so it's no surprise that many brands prefer to avoid taking a public stand on controversial issues. "Commerce is downstream from culture; for every action, there is an initial impact and a backlash," says Bill Gullan, president at the branding agency Finch Brands. "Brands need to consider the compelling business benefits of making a political statement — first, how the issue impacts employees and customers."

Commenting on some of the Super Bowl ads, Gullan, who has a degree in political science, concludes that it was strategic for Airbnb to take a side on the issue of President Donald Trump's executive order banning travel from seven predominately Muslim countries because the company's stance is consistent with the sensibilities of its global traveler base and progressive leadership team. Conversely, Gullan points to one of the games' automobile ads that took on the issue of the gender wage gap. "While beautifully executed, [it] seems less appropriate," he says. "It's tempting to jump on an issue that's important and on-trend, but it's essential to have credibility before making a statement."

Patagonia's Kenna, who spent more than a decade in government and politics before joining the private sector, echoes Gullan's observation on that key point. "There are plenty of issues around the world that we don't speak up on, but not because we don't care about them," she says. "We are, I think, a credible source of information around environmental issues, so that's the place for us to speak out. There is a natural tie-in on those issues with our brand."

I've been exposed to a lot of companies that struggle with this very question, and it's been my experience that companies do best when they find an area that makes sense for them to speak out on, as opposed to trying to speak out on everything."

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