Should Your Brand Take a Stand?

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Cynthia E. Clark

Leaders face tough choices on whether and how their businesses should take a public stance on current events. Today’s conflicts may be particularly precarious to navigate.

Growing concern over polarizing culture wars points to the need for leaders to understand when it makes sense for their company to speak out — especially on an issue largely unrelated to their brand. People are divided on the prospect of businesses publicly stating their positions on potentially divisive topics, but employee opinion is also a key perspective to consider.

In a survey of 5,458 Americans that Bentley University recently conducted with Gallup, less than half of the respondents (41%) said that businesses should take a public stance on current events, down from 48% in 2022. However, there is a growing divide between generations. Fifty-three percent of younger Americans ages 18 to 29 are in favor of companies speaking out (down from 59% in 2022), but only 35% of those ages 45 and over share the sentiment (down from 41% and 43%, respectively, in 2022). Differences also fall along political party lines: Sixty-two percent of Democrats said businesses should speak out, while only 17% of Republican respondents agreed.

Deciding Factors: Issues and Context

Research has found that when there’s a great deal of societal disagreement over a particular issue, thoughtfully considering the brand’s response is critical. Nearly equal numbers of people say they do or don’t want companies to speak out on divisive topics, so executives are in a bind: No response will please everyone. In a recent study by Weber Shandwick and KRC Research, 65% of respondents said that companies have a responsibility to speak up, even if the issue is sensitive or controversial. However, in the Bentley/Gallup poll, only 15% of respondents said that companies should speak out about religion, and only 27% on international conflicts, compared with 55% for the topic of climate change.

Although the survey preceded the Oct. 7, 2023, attack by Hamas against Israel, it reflects a historically consistent scenario: Companies typically stay away from speaking out about religious conflicts. In recent months, however, we’ve witnessed unprecedented fervor regarding the ongoing war and the long-contested issue of Palestinian statehood. Indeed, speaking out is increasingly issue- and context-dependent.

For example, Google, which has historically encouraged employee debate, fired 28 employees in April 2024 who protested against its cloud computing contract with Israel. Although CEO Sundar Pichai stressed a desire to maintain the company’s open culture, he condemned the protesters for acting “in a way that disrupts coworkers or makes them feel unsafe” by taking over office spaces and defacing property.

Accenture CEO Julie Sweet chose a middle ground and told her employees that the company would be splitting a $3
million donation between two organizations dedicated to relief efforts for civilians — Israel’s Magen David Adom emergency services and the Palestinian Red Crescent Society. In March, Sweet accepted the Anti-Defamation League’s Courage Against Hate Award on behalf of Accenture’s employees, for their “zero tolerance of hate and bigotry of any kind.”

These different responses offer evidence that a new approach is emerging that takes into consideration the potential to offend a company’s consumers or employees by taking either side of a socially contested issue. Overall, this suggests that when an issue is likely to be highly contested, like religion or international conflicts, CEOs are wise to strike a middle ground, recognizing that their employees and consumers may have disparate perspectives.

Before Speaking Out, Speak In

Communicating with employees before making public statements is a must. Employees’ reactions offer a lens on the degree to which they feel that company leaders’ actions align with the stated values of the organization. Employees need to know where the company and the CEO stand on certain pivotal issues — especially issues that resonate with the espoused values or mission of the company — and what values the company is expecting employees themselves to uphold.

Speaking out affects recruitment as well. Potential hires are more likely to pursue employment with a company whose CEO has spoken out in support of social issues than with a company whose CEO either opposed popular social issues or remained neutral. And as the Bentley/Gallup survey shows, workers under 30 — the CEOs of tomorrow — are 70% more likely to want to work for a company that takes a stand on social issues.

About the Author

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