

Brand Slacktivism and Corporate Wokeness

Desmond Tutu once said that 'Actions speak louder than words' but have the Black Lives Matter campaigns of brands reflected this?

WRITTEN BY THAVEESHA JINADASA



Brand Activism is when a company seeks to have an impact in promoting social, economic, environmental or political issues, which may occur if it aligns with their core values, builds positive brand image and customer loyalty.

The Black Lives Matter movement has become one of the biggest social movements in recent times, highlighting the systematic racial injustice faced by black communities across America; most notably George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmed Arboary.

Due to the contentious political climate of this turbulent time, brands have experienced the pressure of having to show case the authenticity of their activism.

This article outlines brands which have been actively combating the problems in society (**Activists**), brands which base their marketing campaigns on favourable macroeconomic variables and brands which choose profitability over being socially ethical (**Slacktivism**) in the past decade.

Brand Activists

Many brands have attempted Black Lives Matter campaigns but only a few are actually contributing to the change.

Ben and Jerry's launched a social media campaign which talked about 'dismantling white supremacy.' The ad took advantage of their significant **brand characteristics** such as their signature font which helped make it instantly recognizable, however used contrasting black and white colouring instead of their usual blue and white (brand colors) to outline the topic at hand.

The theme of the slogan for the campaign was a contrast to your generic campaign statements such as 'standing with the black community,' which highlighted their core values.

From teaching its staff about structural racism to focusing on diversifying recruitment channels to give equal opportunity to all people; Ben and Jerry's owners Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield have made **corporate social responsibility** a core value within the business since its inception.



Brand Activists: Ben and Jerry's launched their 'Pecan Resist' flavour in support of the BLM movement.



Brand Activists: Ben and Jerry's is one of the many brands which have launched print ads to dismantle white supremacy.

Nike: The Middle Ground

Nike has also been a brand on the forefront of combating social injustice. The **'Don't Do It' Campaign** was a 1 minute advert which urges people to "not turn your back on racism" and "be part of the change" in the world. The heading of the ad was a flip on their usual 'Just Do It' slogan in order to target their core customers and draw in their fanbase towards the BLM Movement.

Surprisingly, they saw **significant brand support** from their largest rival Adidas who simply retweeted the Nike Campaign with the phrase "Together is how we move forward, Together is how we make change."

This campaign goes to show how the public appreciated the union and camaraderie shown between the brands coming together for a good cause. This is a much simpler and shorter campaign than most traditional Nike advertisements but the viral nature of it enabled it to establish a **large cultural footprint** during this time. However, unlike Ben and Jerry's, Nike has had a history of unequal employment.



Nike- The Middle Ground: A screengrab of solidarity between Nike and Adidas, two of the largest sporting brands in the world



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As per Forbes, Nike is one of the least diverse companies in the world. A majority of Nike's employees have been caucasian for a long period of time but with new legislations coming in for social equality, there has been significant internal reform. In the latest transparency reports, Nike noted that there has been growth in employees in management roles fulfilled by minorities.

Critics also accuse Nike of **'Commodity activism'** as they can be seen to attach themselves to political aims and goals with the desire to attach themselves to and thereafter boost sales. Clear evidence is seen with the **controversy which surrounded Colin Kaepernick in 2017 when they launched the 'Dream Crazy' campaign** in order to take advantage of the anger felt by the black population during a time when racial inequality was a hot topic in the sports world.

It is easy to infer that Nike is a brand which is and has been at the peak of their marketing powers for years on end; **However were their marketing campaigns genuine? Will any of their past actions deter their efforts in the long run?**

Slacktivism

Brands are now held accountable by consumers to practice what they preach in their **hirings, collaborations and ad campaigns.**

In 2018, L'Oreal (the cosmetic giant) launched an anti-racism campaign known as **'Lessons of Worth.'** This campaign was built along the lines of L'Oreal's signature tagline 'Because You're Worth it' in collaboration with renowned black filmmaker Viola Davies to show that their products are meant for all kinds of skins.

The brand recruited transgender **micro-influencer Munroe Bergdorf** in order to improve upon the diversity aspect of the campaign but was short-lived when she spoke out at a peaceful protest.

In an almost ironic fashion, **Cheryl Cole (the brand's main ambassador)** was found guilty of assault after beating up a black nightclub attendant but was not sacked or punished for any of her actions despite this being a 'racial assault.'

Fast-forward to 2020, what followed was a barrage of fiery comments (i.e. 'Racist Snakes' popping up the most often). Continuous talks with Bergdorf and BLM organizations amid the backlash has led to L'oreal creating the UK Diversity and inclusion diversity advisory board which included her as an honorary member.

The scenario above is a great example of **corporate gaslighting**, a clear racial divide and how micro-influencers are used as pawns to manipulate the view of the media in order to appear in an 'aesthetic manner.'

With more influencers like Munroe Bergdorf speaking up; this problem can be dissolved in order to allow micro-influencers from all walks of life to work with brands with no injustice and the real wrongdoers to be brought into the spotlight; even if it means jeopardizing their brand image. As for now, a brand cannot simply raise its voice amidst a national crisis, unless its purpose is strongly rooted in that social issue and it has a proven track record on the topic.



Slacktivism: L'Oreal's 2018 'Lessons of Worth' campaign was meant to celebrate and demonstrate equality for all skin tones. Instead, the true meaning of this message was lost in the media onslaught of beauty influencer 'tea'.

Why are some brands silent

For marketers, there is the constant argument of **'Profitability vs Corporate Social Responsibility'**. In the short term, shareholders look to maximise profitability by reducing costs even if it means being unethical. Marketing campaigns tend to be costly for some businesses which is why 'slacktivism' is visible among many brands. With a fragile and tense political climate, companies are afraid of making a risky move and ending up on the wrong side of history.

So how can brands approach the current macroeconomic climate in a manner which benefits their internal profitability and external corporate social responsibility?

UNSW School of Marketing's Professor Nitika Garg has stated that a step in the right direction would be "to talk about the issue on their social media platforms, while instituting policies which reflect practices in the company, providing the necessary support and funding for minorities and donating to the cause."

In 2020, every brand has now been woken up to the injustice within the spines of society. For large corporations, this may not mean a lot in terms of profitability or monetary value but could help reduce the amount of lives impacted.



Thanks for reading!
Thaveesha Jinadasa
from MarkSoc Publications

George Floyd
Ahmaud Arbery
Breonna Taylor...



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FOR UNITY.
WE STAND FOR
ACCEPTANCE.
AND WE STAND
AGAINST RACISM.**



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