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# Time to take a stand: Majority of indian consumers want brands to voice opinion on socio-political issues

July 5, 2020, 5:27 PM IST [Dr Muneer](#) in [The Medici Way](#) | [India](#) | TOI



As the lockdown dovetails to an economic nose-dive, with massive job losses and walking-class misery, I wonder why no brands in India has taken a stance on any of the prevailing socio-political issues. Overwhelming evidence suggests that Indian consumers wish they would. I initially thought the Unilever move at last to remove the fairness bias from its products was in solidarity with the raging racism issue but soon realised it was in response to a government mandate issued in February this year.

When the “pandemic of racism” led to George Floyd’s death and blown into a riots across the USA, celebrities far away in India had come out in full support #BlackLivesMatter while keeping quiet when minorities and migrants were discriminated against here. They never bothered saying #AllLivesMatter.

#MetooIndia, CAA, corruption, Chinese Apps, media freedom, holy cow, LGBT and many other socio-political issues plague us today, and undoubtedly, the world we live in is getting polarised by the minute. The pandemonium is at feverish pitch in Twitter, WhatsApp and FB where friends turn foes on trivial political or religious altercations. Yet, Indian brands have been phlegmatic.

Our research and a couple of global studies indicate that more than two-third of Indians want companies to stand up on issues they believe in. The number increases as we go down the socio-economic segments and younger consumers. The “belief-driven” consumers are on the rise globally too, with China at the top (78%) followed by Brazil, India and France (68%) and USA at 57%.

Recall the fallout Pepsi faced – and had to apologise – for its Kendall Jenner ad in the USA, belittling a social movement by saying a soft drink can solve it. With the youth passionate about many issues ranging from privacy and net neutrality (86%), unemployment (86%), and access to healthcare (84%) to sexual harassment (82%), discrimination (81%), cost of higher education (75%) and LGBT rights (60%), they expect more responsible behaviour by brands to be relevant to them.

The belief-driven buyers who include those who “strongly hold passionate beliefs” and convinced that the brands they buy are a route to express those beliefs, or who will change their buying behaviour based on a brand’s stand, do not come back to a brand that they boycotted – studies in the UK and the USA point out. As Indians fight their way to surviving the pandemic aftermath, social injustice and discrimination of all types, they will use their buying power to support some of the causes they believe in.

More than 65% of Indians believe that companies spend too much time peddling products

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## AUTHOR



**Dr Muneer**

Muneer is a global expert columnist, writing on topical issues looked through management frameworks. He wears multiple hats including that of a social evangelist as the co-founder of the non-profit Medici Institute that was mentored by the late Dr Kalam, management consultant and startup entrepreneur. His expertise is in strategy execution having worked with global brands across borders. Current passion is in driving governments to execute what they promise. He is the managing director of CustomerLab Solutions, an innovative consulting firm in partnership with leading minds of the world and also that of a US-based deep-tech startup. He pioneered the setting up of thought leadership seminar industry in India in the late 1990s and had been instrumental in delivering cutting-edge knowledge to the C-suite, in partnership with Times Group.

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but not enough to find ways to get them attention. Clearly, brands need to make it easier for customers to see brand values, as Indians tend to be more belief-driven than others. Patanjali, for instance, grew exponentially on its unique Indian, chemical-free, and bold anti-MNC stance. It seems like a quandary for Indian enterprises: Why stick our necks out by projecting a point of view when there is no compulsion from the marketplace, or when our brands aren't in bad press?

Elsewhere in the world, more and more brands are moving from being bystanders to activists, by launching powerful campaigns, braving the ire of groups of customers. They are engaging in dialogue on the big social and political issues from Trump to George Floyd. They are bold in taking a leap away from the relatively cozy zone of brand purpose and are not afraid to discuss issues that are controversial and likely to create strong reactions. The controversial comment by the Cross-Fit CEO on Floyd's death resulted in many gyms quitting the affiliation and that cost him his job.

Nike was one of the first to support #BlackLivesMatter protests. For a change, competitor Adidas retweeted Nike message. McDonalds' support led to a criticism that they didn't give adequate protection to black employees during the pandemic. Ben&Jerry raised the strongest voice against police brutality and wanted to end its white supremacy. Compare all that with the total silence in India during the anti-CAA protests and killings.

Heineken, Airbnb and Patagonia are some companies that have taken up a position on socio-political issues. Others like Kellogg went ahead and raised divisive political issues at the risk of losing sales. Kellogg boycotted one of the largest conservative media groups in the USA (Beritbart News Network) because of the value mismatch during the 2016 US elections. Starbucks took a stand by criticising Trump and weathered the fierce #boycottStarbucks social media campaign. Interestingly, brands (Under Armour and New Balance) that sided with Trump didn't fare well at all.

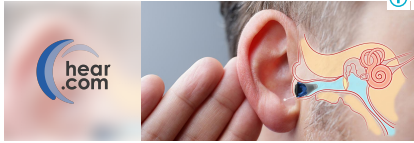
In the social media, dynamic conversations will happen with or without the brand getting involved directly, as in the case of MJ Akbar incident when his old company got mentioned. That makes it imperative for enterprises to express the brand values.

An event like the ban of a comedian by Indigo Airlines was a good point for a brand to take a stance but not even a competing airline did. A sense of mission drives others to this: Patagonia took on Trump for abolishing many protected national parks; Kellogg boycotted one of the largest conservative media groups in the USA for values mismatch.

What challenges brands might encounter if they get dragged into socio-political issues? I am sure they will alienate some customers but will get others. Remember the Surf Excel ad depicting a Muslim girl helping her kid brother to go to Eid prayer without getting splashed with colours amidst Holi celebrations in their street that resulted in boycott calls by Hindu fundamentalists on Microsoft Excel? If the stance taken is consistent with the brand values, the outcome will be net positive. I feel brands may be better off taking socio-economic issues rather than politics or religion.

The Airbnb #WeAccept campaign that took a stand against Trump's nation-dividing travel ban with its bold declaration "the world is more beautiful the more you accept," became a huge success. Airbnb also supported post-Brexit London with the #LondonIsOpen campaign offering free housing to Syrian refugees. Do you think the copycat Oyo will dare do such a thing in India?

In a country where companies make a show of donating to PM CARES even as they deny salaries to us, will any brand stand up for what it believes in? Will even an MNC brand take a stand against that of the ruling government here? Like #MinorityLivesMatter? They better be. The research clearly has written all over the wall!



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