

Stand Up And Be Relevant

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In a lighter vein, will any company be bold enough to discuss the DeMo effects on its business with a #metooDeMo campaign?



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by Dr M Muneer

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#MetooIndia, Sabarimala, Section-377, divisive politics, the inept liberalism, media freedom, holy cow, 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 politico-religious differences. Surprisingly, Indian companies have been phlegmatic on taking a stand on such issues, to say the least.

Yet, nearly two thirds of Indians don't want these companies to stay silent on current issues as per a couple of recent studies. This has gone up from last year when only 50% customers wanted that. The so-called "belief-driven" consumers are on the rise globally, with China taking the top slot (78%) followed by Brazil, India and France (68%). USA folks are lagging behind at 57%.

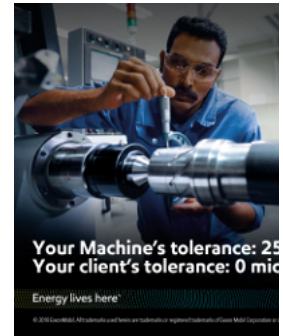
Taking a stand poses perils and gains for companies but consumers will be more receptive to brands communicating social or political messages on social media compared to other platforms. By taking a position, enterprises stand to lose some audience but by not taking "heart" in social issues, they will probably lose much more in the millennial era.

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 Internet security (86%), unemployment (86%), and access to healthcare (84%) to sexual harassment (82%), discrimination (81%), cost of higher education (75%) and gay rights (60%), they expect more responsible behaviour by brands to be relevant.

The belief-driven buyers that 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. The UK as well as USA studies point to this fact.

More than 65% of Indian consumers believe that companies spend too much time pushing them to buy but not enough effort to find ways to get them to pay attention. Clearly brands need to make it easier for customers to see brand values, as Indian consumers tend to be more belief-driven than others. Patanjali, for instance, grew exponentially on its unique Indian, chemical-free, and bold anti-MNC stance. We don't see other brands taking strong positions on current social, cultural or political issues. 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?

However, elsewhere in the world, more and more companies 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 of the season. They are bold and taking a leap away from the relatively cozy zone of brand purpose and are not afraid to discuss issues that are controversial and are likely to create strong reactions either way.



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Heineken, Airbnb, Patagonia and Ben&Jerry are some companies taking up a position on socio-political issues at large. 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. Lego and Daily Mail is another such example. Starbucks took a stand by criticising Trump and weathered the fierce #boycottStarbucks social media campaign against them. Interestingly, brands (Under Armour and New Balance) that sided with Trump didn't fare well in their sales.

In the social media, dynamic conversations will happen with or without us involved, and our brands or company may get mentioned directly or indirectly as in the case of MJ Akbar incident when his old company got mentioned. That makes it imperative for enterprises to change the stance of silence and come out to reiterate the brand values or what the company stands for.

If the developed country examples are anything to go by, given the current findings on belief-driven consumers, India will soon follow suit. For many brands taking a stance or starting a dialogue on social issues is driven by events such as the case with many USA airlines refusing to fly immigrant children separated from their parents at the border. For others, a sense of mission drives the initiative such as the one with Patagonia, which took on Trump for abolishing many protected national parks. Did any Indian brand react to the various mining and environmental abuses that had been prevalent in India for years now?

What challenges Indian companies might encounter if and when they get dragged to engage in political or social issues? Given the current polarised society, certainly they will alienate many while getting the support of others. If a company were to make a statement either positive or negative about Modi, for every aye it gets there will be twice as many nays/"don't-care"s.

Just as in business strategy, any position a company takes will estrange some customers but if the stance is consistent with the company or brand values, the outcome will be net positive. For Indian companies it may be best to look at socio-economic issues rather than politics or religion, as research in the US shows a for-or-against-Trump stance has created more backlash for brands. Once zeroed in, the CEO should lead the new initiative. The more visible the CEO, the better it will be to gain public trust. It is imperative that the brand authentically connects its stance to a relevant point in culture.

The Airbnb #WeAccept campaign that took a stance against Trump's nation-dividing travel ban with its bold declaration "the world is more beautiful the more you accept," became a huge success. It also supported post-Brexit London with the #LondonIsOpen campaign offering free housing to Syrian refugees. Will its copycat Oyo Rooms dare take a stand on similar

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In a lighter vein, will any company be bold enough to discuss the DeMo effects on its business with a #metooDeMo campaign? It is unlikely that Indian companies will stand up and be counted on controversial issues given our risk aversion to all things monetary. However, the writing on the wall cannot be clearer!

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Very very topical and research based article. The examples outlined made a good case for Indian companies to take a stance.

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