

# Indian consumers want their brands to take a stand

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When a “pandemic of racism” led to George Floyd’s death in Minneapolis, arson and civil disturbances erupted across the US. What astonished me was not that an African-American had been killed by a Caucasian cop, but how celebrities even in India rallied online in support of #BlackLivesMatter. This was in contrast with their relative silence on minorities and migrants being discriminated against right here at home. As our lockdown dovetails an economic nose-dive, with massive job losses and walking-class misery, I wonder why almost no brand in India has taken a stance on any of these socio-political issues. There is evidence that Indians wish they would.

We are haunted by a variety of issues, from #MeTooIndia and citizenship to media freedom and China, and the world we live in is getting polarized by the minute. Pandemonium is at feverish pitch on Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook, where friends

turn foes on trivial political or religious matters. Yet, Indian marketers who must keep their market’s pulse have been phlegmatic in their response.

Our research indicates that more than two-thirds of Indians—higher than in previous years—want companies to stand up on important issues. This demand rises as we go down socio-economic segments and age groups. My nephew is Gen-Y and niece is Gen-Z, and both feel more strongly about it than my Gen-X sister. “Belief-driven consumers” are on the rise globally too, with several global studies putting China on top, followed by Brazil, India and France and the US, in that order.

Taking a stance poses perils and gains for companies, but as consumers, we are more receptive to those that convey social or political messages on social media. Brands may lose some customers in doing this, but by not taking social issues to heart, they will probably lose many more in post-pandemic India. The 67% of us who “strongly hold passionate beliefs” and view the brands we buy as expressions of our values, make choices based on what they stand for. As we fight to survive the pandemic, social injustice and discrimination, we will use our buying

power to support some of the causes we believe in.

Recall the fallout that PepsiCo faced—and had to apologize—for its Kendall Jenner ad that seemed to belittle a social movement by saying a soft drink could solve it. Our research suggests that the youth are most passionate about issues like privacy and net neutrality (86%), unemployment (86%), access to healthcare (84%), sexual harassment (82%), discrimination (81%) and LGBT rights (60%). They expect brands to behave responsibly on these.

Over 65% of respondents also believe that companies spend too much time peddling products, but not enough on ways to get our attention. Clearly, brands need to make it easier for us to assess their values. Patanjali’s exponential growth some years ago was partly a function of its unique position as a chemical-free brand, offering an alternative to

the products of multinational companies.

Most companies, however, seem to be in a quandary: Why stick our necks out by projecting a point of view when there is no market compulsion to do it?

Elsewhere in the world, I see more and more brands moving from being bystanders to activists. They’re launching powerful campaigns and braving the ire of interest groups. They are engaging in dialogue on big issues, from George Floyd’s death to Donald Trump’s presidency. They are

boldly leaping away from the comfort of “brand purpose”, unafraid to address controversial matters. A case in point: The chief executive officer of CrossFit lost his job after making a comment on Floyd’s death that resulted in many gyms snapping their affiliation with it.

For the first time, I see arch-rivals Nike and Adidas agreeing on something: #BlackLivesMatter. Ben & Jerry’s, an ice-

cream brand, is the strongest voice I hear against police brutality. It has called for an end to White supremacy. I couldn’t help compare all this with the shell that brands here seem to have withdrawn into over the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests and Delhi riots.

An event like the ban of a comedian by an airline was a good occasion for brands to take a stance, but almost none did. In the US, Patagonia took on Trump for abolishing many protected national parks, and Kellogg boycotted a media group over a values mismatch. Brands that get dragged into socio-political arguments do face challenges. They could alienate some customers, but also impress others. Recall the Surf Excel ad that evoked online cries for a boycott of Microsoft Excel? Brands may be better off taking on socio-economic issues, rather than politics or religion. The basic rule is this: If the stance taken is consistent with the brand’s values, the outcome will be net positive.

In a country where companies talk so much about consumer engagement, will any brand stand up for what it believes in? Like #MinorityLivesMatter? Our research promises a receptive audience and long-term gains in brand reputation.

## QUICK READ

Companies in the US have thrown their weight behind #BlackLivesMatter and leapt onto anti-racism platforms, while brands here seem reluctant to get embroiled in controversy.

Research, however, suggests that Indians would respond well to brands that bare their hearts.

This may seem risky, but they could score gains if their stance is consistent with brand values.