

THE BUSINESS IMPERATIVE THAT IS 'BRAND PURPOSE'

by George Gilmore



The year 2020 was like no other, and 2021 is unlikely to resemble anything remotely close to normality. The coronavirus pandemic has forced everyone, all over the world, to change their daily routines and socially distance, causing millions (if not billions) of us to rethink what is important to us.

We have known for some time now that we are never going to just return to the old status quo. Things will look different once the vaccines have been widely rolled out and we now have the exciting prospect of being able to shape what that new future will look like.

The horrific murder of George Floyd and the subsequent global support for the Black Lives Matter movement is the clearest example of people coming together to start shaping that future.

On an individual level, this may mean working from home, spending more time with family, being more conscious of those around us who might be more vulnerable, or perhaps attending a protest rally. These may seem like small changes for each of us individually, but for brands and their marketing teams this means a substantial shift in their target consumers' passions and behaviours.

Given this, not only is it the right thing to do, it is a business imperative that brands display real social conscience and put their huge budgets and marketing power into helping shape a more positive future.

It may sound idealistic to expect this of brands and much has been written about those that are doing it well versus those that are just jumping on the bandwagon. There have been some who have argued that agencies shouldn't encourage brand purpose, and that "brand purpose is simply something that helps advertisers and marketers feel better about themselves", but there is research to show that it is actually a commercial imperative.



I'm not going to waste time rehashing campaigns that have clearly been virtue-signalling, or even calling out brands whose marketing output says one thing while their Board clearly screams another. We all know that these businesses will ultimately be called out. Instead, I want to focus on how brands can use their platforms in meaningful ways to make real change, and why those that don't will suffer in the long run.

Firstly, money talks. It always has, and leading brands should know this better than most. Some have already found ways to positively wield the power it imbues.

In response to Black Lives Matter, Procter & Gamble, which has an annual global media spend of over \$6.5 billion, launched a comprehensive review of its media buying to ensure that all channels, networks, platforms and programmes, on which it advertises, accurately and respectfully portray Black people. They will also look at their creative supply chain to improve and increase representation of people of colour within agencies and production crews. Unilever has also recently pledged to boost annual spend on companies owned and managed by women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and members of the LGBTQI+ community from £300m to £1.8bn by 2025. With this level of financial clout, these organisations have the power not only to improve themselves but to ensure that others join them for the ride.

We have also seen over 1,000 businesses, including Coca-Cola, Starbucks and Unilever, stand up to Facebook by joining the #StopHateforProfit campaign and pulling millions in media spend from the platform. Although they may only be the beginning, hitting Facebook's bottom line led to concessions, including the creation of a senior role to oversee civil rights; the establishment of a dedicated team to study algorithmic racial bias; the public release of their long-delayed civil rights audit that demonstrated their "vexing" policy decisions were "setbacks for civil rights"; a new commitment to an independent audit; and, they have finally begun taking long overdue action against some extremist organisations and hate groups, recently going so far as to block President Trump's account – although this has since been restored.

Sport often acts as a microcosm of society and this has certainly been true throughout lockdown, highlighting issues around physical and mental health, as well as race and inequality. In the US, the high-profile 'U-turn' by the NFL to come out in support of its black players who choose to take a knee during the national anthem, and the decision by the Washington Football Team to change its name are examples of how 'brand personality' can have huge influence.

All brands will at some point in their lifespan have considered their 'brand personality' or 'brand persona'. This is the set of values that defines the brand and helps it appeal to its target audience. It plays out through all its communications, advertising and, ultimately, every touchpoint it has with its customers. In refusing to support Colin Kaepernick and the other black NFL players who took a knee, Roger Goodell and the NFL told the world that their 'brand personality' was unsympathetic to the struggles that black people face in the United States. Thankfully this has now been rectified.

A recent [Cone/Porter Novelli Purpose Study](#) found that “78% of Americans believe companies must do more than just make money; they must positively impact society as well”.

Seventy-eight per cent is a significant figure, but unless these consumers vote with their wallets then brands will be able to continue making money and forgetting about their social impact.

Fortunately, Generation Z, who have more to gain from an improved society – and now represent more than 40 per cent of all shoppers – are leading the way in conscious consumerism. According to a [study by DoSomething Strategic](#), 76 per cent of the Generation Z respondents said they have purchased or would consider purchasing a brand or product to show allegiance to the issues the brand supported. Furthermore, 67 per cent have stopped purchasing or would consider doing so if the company stood for something or behaved in a way that didn't align with their values.

So, there it is. The trend amongst the younger generation is clear – play your part or we will start withholding our pounds and dollars.

Brand purpose shouldn't be a marketing initiative, it is a business imperative that should go to the heart of everything an organisation does, says and believes. And if it doesn't? Well, then you might not be around that much longer anyway.

