

Commodity Activism: Leveraging Purchases and Voices for Civic Change

Mixing civic movements, politics, investments, and brands is nothing new: “What’s good for GM is good for America,” “Look for the Union Label,” corporate divestment from South Africa to end Apartheid, American-Express-led campaign to renovate the Statue of Liberty, and a tsunami of consumer-facing “certifications” – Heart Smart, Cruelty-free, Energy Star, GMO-free, LEED certified, etc. – have joined the eponymous ‘Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval’ established in 1909.

Today, much of the public perceives that multi-national and wealthy companies direct, even determine politics and policies. Further, individual and group identity, are defined by the specific products they use. So it comes as no surprise that, since 2000, there has been a 75% rise in social activism targeted at businesses. This is not just a trend. GenZ (i.e. future customers and employees) is at the forefront.*

CSR as Reputation Enhancement and Preventative Medicine for Brands

Matthew '16, Irma '17, Florence '18, Michael '18 – not my kids' high school graduations, but the hurricanes for which the Atlanta Motor Speedway opened its grounds and facilities to evacuees. This was not only the right thing to do with their unique assets, but also likely a way to attract new customers and employees.

Society expects both companies and their brands to be responsible, transparent, leaders and investors in human rights, environmental sustainability, employee engagement, and civic development on a local, national, even global scale. So private sector firms must formulate a relevant strategy, activation blueprint, and communications plan that will have a profitable measurable positive impact on issues important to ALL stakeholders. In doing so, they must consider their unique assets, business goals, leadership profile, and company culture.

A few strategies to consider:

- 1) Define the *raison d'être* of the business in social terms.
*Wells Fargo, “Every day, we invest \$1M in local communities.”
- 2) Collaborate with activists, supply chain, or even direct competitors.
*Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* led to a phased plan to eliminate use of DDT.
*Hotel industry created Global Soap, now a 501(c)3, to fight waste and disease.
- 3) Pursue “certifications” relevant to the industry. (see above)
- 4) Accept awards IF they are deserved and benefit the cause, brand, or employees

A few non-negotiable elements:

- 1) No Green-washing – society demands transparency, not perfection.
- 2) No Astro-turfing – others *can* speak on brand’s behalf, if it’s authentic.
*Customers, non-profit partners, beneficiaries, employees, experts
- 3) Measure everything and use the data to improve internally & externally.

*Note: this environment affects small and mid-sized businesses as well, from restaurants to retailers, manufacturers to service providers.