

2015 will be the year brands take a public stand on social issues

Instead of just touting their own sustainability, this year brands will focus on gender equality, racial justice, climate change and more

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A growing number of companies are taking stands on social issues like gay marriage, gender equality and racial justice. In 2015, look for 'pro-social' business engagement to explode. Photograph: David Poller/Zuma Press/Corbis

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2015 will be the year of the pro-social brand.

Pro-social brands are the next step for companies looking to morally engage with consumers. Driven by marketers who are moving beyond claims of sustainability and into strong stands on relevant social issues, this trend picked up momentum in 2014. It will be positively explosive in 2015.

So what's the difference between sustainable and pro-social brands?

A traditional sustainable brand expects that customers will laud and applaud it for its charitable giving and its actions on key environmental issues. It's the classic, safe, (usually) apolitical "vote with your dollars" approach: sustainable brands tell stories that cast them in the role of hero and expect audiences to simply play the role of starry-eyed hero-worshipper.

In the past, marketing based on sustainability or triple-bottom line approaches has been shown to drive a certain amount of loyalty. However, brands have also learned that they reach a point of diminishing returns.

The most ethical shoppers care about these issues, but the majority of customers hardly notice the claims of cleaner supply chains, fair trade or carbon offsetting. And even if they do notice, many have lost trust in such claims. Even much-admired one-for-one programs, such as those pioneered by Toms shoes, have lost their novelty.

This isn't to say that the era of brands striving to behave ethically is over or should end: cleaning up supply chains and pushing for fair trade are more essential than ever. But making these activities the core of a brand's promise is not enough. What's more, the failure of these sorts of marketing approaches often discourages brands from continuing these programs.

Social issues transform ethics

The pro-social trend will accelerate the urgency for ethical behavior. At the same time, it will transform how companies - and customers - live those ethics.

Pro-social brands are more politically disruptive and inspiring than basic sustainable brands. Instead of focusing on what a brand has done internally to drive a better world, pro-social brands look outward to take a stand on key moral issues.

When they weigh in, they publicly prove that these issues have reached a tipping point of acceptability - and, in so doing, they increase the rate of change. A perfect example is the issue of same-sex marriage. In 2014, the Huffington Post reported on 27 major companies that boldly came out in favor of marriage equality. Taking this position wasn't a safe stand, but it was a highly viral one.

When a brand puts a stake in the ground on a controversial topic, such as carbon pricing, gender equality, racial justice, or even excessive corporate power, it sticks its neck out, adding fuel to a cause and challenging its customers to rally behind it.

The brand becomes far more participatory, making room for its customers to take on a heroic role by fighting for a more altruistic, tolerant, selfless world. The pro-social brand doesn't say: "Look what we've done. Now buy our stuff." Instead it says: "We're willing to take a stand. Stand with us."

I've written a few times in the Guardian this year about how brands like Always, Airbnb and Fat Tire are building participatory tribes around key pro-social values. I also called for brands to take bold, political stands on climate change. Not long afterward, major corporations - including Coke and Pepsi - joined forces on Collectively.org to call for political action on the issue.

Do brands have a place in politics?

That said, there are a couple of obvious pitfalls to the pro-social trend. For one, some think the last thing the US needs is more corporations meddling in the political process. And for that matter, it's worth asking if consumers really need big brands telling them what to think on key social issues.

I think there's an important distinction to be made here. Pro-social branding is not about meddling in electoral politics; rather, it's about taking an accurate read of the pulse of today's culture. For decades, society has been trending toward wider

empathy, diversity and citizen engagement. Pro-social branding helps to amplify that movement.

This connection between beliefs and consumption isn't new: since the mid-20th century, brands have served as tools for people to express their identities and values. True pro-social brands will stay away from the ballot boxes themselves while encouraging citizens to raise their voices.

Avoiding hypocrisy

A second often-voiced concern is that, by making customers the heroes of brands' stories, companies will be able to absolve themselves of cleaning up their own acts. Should we encourage corporations to offload responsibility on citizens?

I don't believe that is much of a danger here. If pro-social brands take bold stands on an issue - as Ben and Jerry's did on campaign finance, for instance - they take a huge risk if they then brazenly violate that stand in their own actions.

For example, if Facebook were to speak out in favor of same sex marriage or Always were to take a stand against discrimination toward girls, they would then be obligated to follow up on their statements in their own activities to avoid hypocrisy. If they then practiced discriminatory behavior behind the scenes, they would set themselves up for major embarrassment.

In effect, taking a controversial pro-social stand becomes a public commitment to better behavior. Thus, a pro-social brand is a sustainable brand - just a more involved and committed one.

How big will this trend go? I predict that the most sensationally viral and impactful marketing campaigns of 2015 will be bold, political and highly in tune with the twitterverse. And I expect their message will extend beyond: "We're sustainable. Buy from us."

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