Building Links Through Social Responsibility & Taking a Stand by @tonynwright



A number of years ago, I conducted a rather ambitious research project to find out how consumer preferences were affected by a brand's social stance.

While I certainly didn't conclusively answer whether a brand should take a stand, I did come to one concrete conclusion:

A brand that takes a social stand almost always sees an SEO benefit from that stand.

For most companies, taking a social stand is difficult. Taking a stand means that a portion of your audience is not going to agree with you – usually the most vocal portion.

No one likes to have people calling for boycotts to your products or services. The resources required to respond to unhappy customers who disagree with your stand can be astronomical.

There’s definitely a lot of think about when taking a stand. But the old adage “Say anything you want about me, just spell my name right” is apropos to the search engine optimization results of a brand taking a stand.

Brands That Stand Get Links

When a brand takes a social stand, they get links. Period.

Both sides of a social cause will link to a brand that is taking a stand.

Those against the stand will link to the brand to make other like-minded individuals aware of a perceived atrocity.

Those who support the brand’s stand will link to make like-minded individuals aware of a brand that supports their worldview. From an SEO standpoint, the brand wins.

The links garnered from a social stand are almost always quality links.

I would argue that one of the easiest ways to get links from major media sites is to take a significant social stand. This works especially well if the social stance you take is unique.

Taking a stand is not the same as jumping on a bandwagon.

For instance, if your company takes a stand supporting the #MeToo movement, don’t expect to get a ton of links.

Even though taking that stand is morally the right thing to do, your stand is not going to mean much from an SEO standpoint.

If you take a unique stand – say, for instance, declaring that your company will not allow certain medicine to be bought using employee benefits (e.g. Hobby Lobby), you’ll get press. And you’ll get links. Quality links.

Is Taking a Stand Right for Your Brand?

SEO does not live in a vacuum. For years, we were siloed as "those people who mess with the website code."

To be successful, the SEO team must have a seat at the table. When deciding whether a brand should take a stand, marketing must be heard – and that includes SEO.

Time after time, brands that understand their audience are more successful when taking a stand.

The best example is Chick-fil-A. While the company didn't intentionally take a stand against same-sex marriage, the remarks of its founder put Chick-fil-A firmly in the crosshairs of the debate.

Despite numerous calls for boycotts of the restaurant, sales skyrocketed. And the number of links the company received was astronomical – some estimate more than 50,000 high-quality links!

Don't get me wrong, I certainly don't agree with Chick-fil-A's stance, but their core customer did. And the company was rewarded for it.

Taking a stand can also backfire.

Look at the foundation Susan G. Komen. The organization took a position against planned parenthood.

This angered many loyal donors. Susan G. Komen certainly benefitted from a lot of links from major news sources, but the SEO benefit wasn't enough to stem the tide of revolt. To this day, the organization is still working to win back an audience they lost over a controversial social stance.

So, how do you know whether to take a stand?

Making this decision is an area where the SEO team should shine. It’s all about the data.

How well can we know our audience?

What is the overall opinion of our customers on the stance we are looking to take?

This is the same type of research SEO professionals do every day when putting together campaigns.

You can provide the data for the decision makers. This makes our role as SEO pros and analysts extremely important in any equation regarding corporate responsibility and social stances.

Who Cares About Your Social Stance?

A recent YouGov study found that 59 percent of Americans would boycott a brand for its political stance. This number is even higher among millennials.

Our study found that geography makes a difference in how consumers react to a stance.

For instance:

- Those in the Northwest U.S. are statistically more likely to support or boycott a brand because of its social or political stance.
- People in the Southern U.S. are less likely to react to a brand’s positions.

In addition, we found that women are more likely to care about political stances than men.

Also, the younger the consumer (above age 18, we don’t have data for minors), the more likely they are to be conscious of a brand’s stance.

What to Consider

It is increasingly popular for brands to take both political and social stances. But it is not a decision that should be taken lightly.

The benefits of taking a stance that resonates with your core audience are immense. Taking the wrong stance can be devastating to the bottom line.

The key is knowing your audience. This is easier for small business, as your audience is usually easily understood.

For enterprise companies, this decision can be much more difficult. That’s why it’s important for all companies to get the analysts and SEO pros at the table.

Digital data is the best source we have for understanding our audience. So use it.

Don’t be afraid to take a stand, but do it right.

The benefits are vast, even if the risks are harrowing.

More Link Building Resources:

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