Taking a Stand Used to Be Taboo in Business. Now, It's Almost Required.

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I started my career in brand management at Johnson & Johnson, a classic packaged-goods marketing organization within a top pharmaceutical company. My first assignment was on Johnson's Baby Shampoo. I was twenty-six years old and I'd never held a baby in my life. I was very low on the learning curve!

Johnson & Johnson was a conservative company at the time, as were many, and we followed a classic marketing approach driven by insights and fueled by creativity. We typically targeted new moms, and in fact, my thinking was considered radical when I suggested we should consider dad in the equation.

We would never comment on a social or political issue. No way, no how. Why would we risk alienating a portion of our consumer base? Back then, even the slightest move sparked a boycott, and we were terrified of the backlash.

When I took over the marketing lead for Clean & Clear, we were the first Johnson & Johnson brand to advertise on MTV, and several activist groups threatened to boycott. I argued that we were merely reaching our target audience of teenage girls on an entertainment property that they frequented. That was about as far as I could push it — going anywhere any further was taboo.

My, how things have changed! Blame it on the digital

revolution, millennials, social media or brands becoming more active in communities. Probably all of the above.

Whatever the reason, brands are now breaking taboos and taking a stand on social issues that matter.

They partly have no choice, which is funny because I felt like I had no choice to make that sort of stand back in the day. Consumers now want to know where a brand stands on issues that matter to them. They're looking for brands to make a positive impact on the world.

Patagonia is suing the government over the protection of public lands. Nike is supporting its athletes in their personal passions, be it social or otherwise. Dick's Sporting Goods changed its policies about gun sales, after yet another mass shooting. Starbucks is working to address racial bias.

These brands know what matters to their consumers, so they are taking matters into their own hands to have an impact. We've never seen this before. It's always been taboo.

But not every brand should take a stand on every issue. As a brand manager, how do you know where to go?

How to find out what matters.

Look to your consumers, your customers, your employees and any other constituents that matter to you and find what matters to them. Talk to them, follow their social channels, discover their influencers and uncover their concerns. If they are concerned about a particular issue, then you should be too.

I would encourage you to take some meaningful action. Keep in mind that it doesn't always have to be controversial. To this day, Johnson & Johnson supports careers in nursing because nurses are central to healthcare. NYU grants free tuition to its medical studies to keep the pipeline of medical professionals robust. Countless brands and organizations are

working to close the pay gap. Not a lot of controversy in any of those issues, only opportunities for brands to bring about change that matters.

You don’t even have to take a public stand. Understanding a social issue and being conscious about its importance may be all you need to do. That understanding can help shape your overall programming, and just acknowledging the issues may be enough for your business.

Certainly, that can’t be taboo anymore.

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