



When Your Brand Takes a Stand:

Social Media Communication Guidelines

Some players in the marketing industry have called 2020 the **Year of Brand Activism**. One marketing executive goes so far as to claim “**U.S. Brands Can Save America.**”

If you are considering whether your brand should take a stand on one or more sociopolitical issues, you have a lot to consider. Learn how and why brands engage in activism, particularly in social media, including what has worked and what has not.

What is Brand Activism and Should You Participate?

Authors Philip Kotler and Christian Sarkar, known for their writing on the subject of **corporate social responsibility** (CSR), put forth brand activism as a concept in 2017. Brand activism, as they describe it, has evolved from CSR. The underlying idea is not new, of course. Brands like **The Body Shop** and **Ben and Jerry's** have long been known for living their values through their business models.

Previously, there was no clear delineation between **social justice, brand activism, and public relations**, but today each is beginning

to take a distinct shape. Kotler and Sarkar differentiate brand activism from simple marketing tactics as a strategy that is values-driven rather than profit-driven. Any brand can hop on a bandwagon, engaging in “performative activism.” True brand activism means engaging in activities that go deeper than creating empty marketing slogans or hashtags.

True activism means taking a thoughtful stand and communicating it well, in a way that preserves your **brand's integrity**.

BRANDS ACTIVISMS

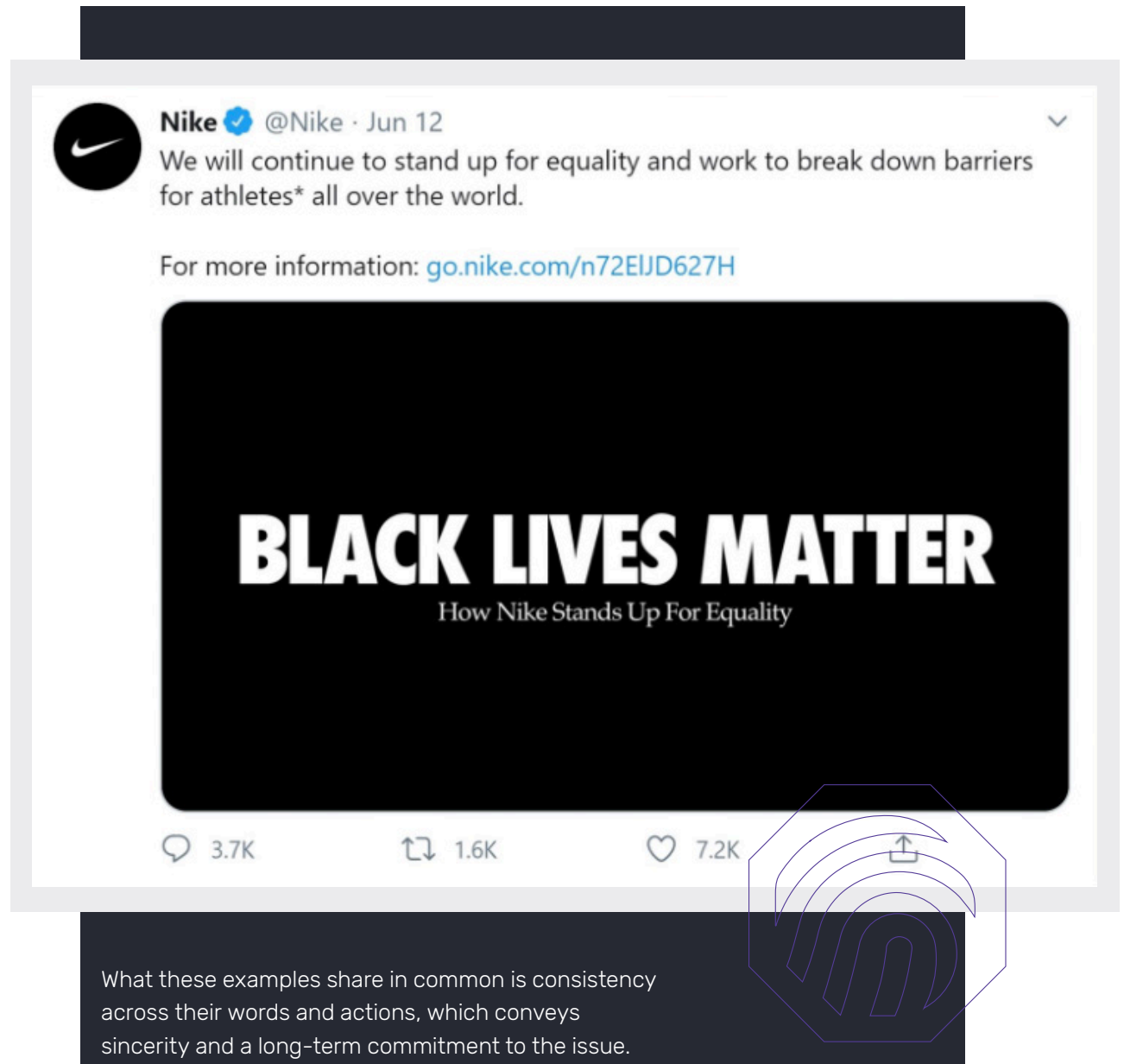
Examples of Successful and Unsuccessful Activism

Even if increasing sales is not the goal of brand activism, it can pay off. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of consumers prefer to reward companies that are willing to take a stand on current issues, according to Accenture Strategy's research report, **"From Me to We: The Rise of the Purpose-led Brand"**. Conversely, mishandling a stance can damage a brand's reputation and even lead to boycotts.

Brands can learn from each other's successes and failures. Here are some examples of brands that succeeded or failed in communicating about high-profile social issues.

Brand Activism Successes

- **Nike** — Their “Don’t Do It” campaign in spring 2020 built upon the brand’s established **history of speaking out against racism**. This came on the heels of a **\$25 million donation** to COVID-19 response efforts. Both actions brought positive attention to a major brand during a time where it seemed every company was being evaluated for how it handled major issues.
- **Netflix** — The streaming service not only posted on social media about their **support for #BlackLivesMatter**, but backed up their words with a “Black Lives Matter” collection of shows and movies to highlight work of Black actors, directors, and creators.
- **Glossier** — This beauty and skincare company halted promotional posts and paired their #BlackLivesMatter posts with **\$1M in donations to the NAACP Legal Defense Fund**, the Equal Justice and other, related organizations. When some former employees reported discrimination, they apologized publicly and outlined a deep company-wide action plan.



Brand Activism Misses

- **L'Oreal** — This major cosmetic brand took heat when they **fired a Black model** for calling out institutional racism. They eventually rehired her and gave her a seat on their diversity board, but it may have been too late to undo the damage to their reputation.
- **Yelp!** — The review site automatically **set up GoFundMe pages for all businesses** listed on its platform, without their permission, at the start of the COVID-19 shutdowns. Their intention was to help small businesses, but many were upset to learn they were opted in without knowing it, and could not easily get the GoFundMe pages taken down.
- **Starbucks** — Despite its outward support for the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the coffee giant told their employees **not to wear anything bearing the slogan while at work**. They learned the peril of taking actions that don't match your message.

BuzzFeed News

Starbucks Won't Let Employees Wear Gear That Supports Black Lives Ma

2020 PROTESTS

Starbucks Won't Let Employees Wear Gear That Supports Black Lives Matter Because It Is Political Or Could Incite Violence

The retail giant said wearing pro-BLM pins or T-shirts would violate its dress code policy because the accessories advocate a "political, religious, or personal issue."



Brianna Sacks
BuzzFeed News Reporter



Albert Samaha
BuzzFeed News Investigative Reporter

Posted on June 10, 2020, at 4:54 p.m. ET

These failures stem from either inconsistency of words and actions or good intentions gone wrong. Either mistake is easy to make without a thoughtful plan.

How Brand Activism Fits Into Content Marketing

Your brand's activist stance should fit into an overall content marketing strategy. Some marketers (18%) actually now consider alignment with social issues as one of the **top three benefits of a content campaign**, alongside brand engagement (34%) and changing perceptions (20%). Brand activism should be one piece of your content marketing strategy, not overshadow the other elements your customers expect.

Social media is often the main communications channel through which brands express their socio political values. Your social channels are a great tool to target key audiences in the moment and spark conversations. The nature of social media, of course, is that you must say what you want to say succinctly using words and images. Trying to fit a complex, nuanced opinion into limited space poses a challenge. Learn how to express your brand's values clearly and effectively — practice and testing will help you improve.

Choosing Your Issues



Don't try to post about every issue that comes up in the news. Doing so would be exhausting, if not impossible, and would weigh down your content resources. Instead, decide what subjects align with your brand and your company values.

To Post or Not to Post

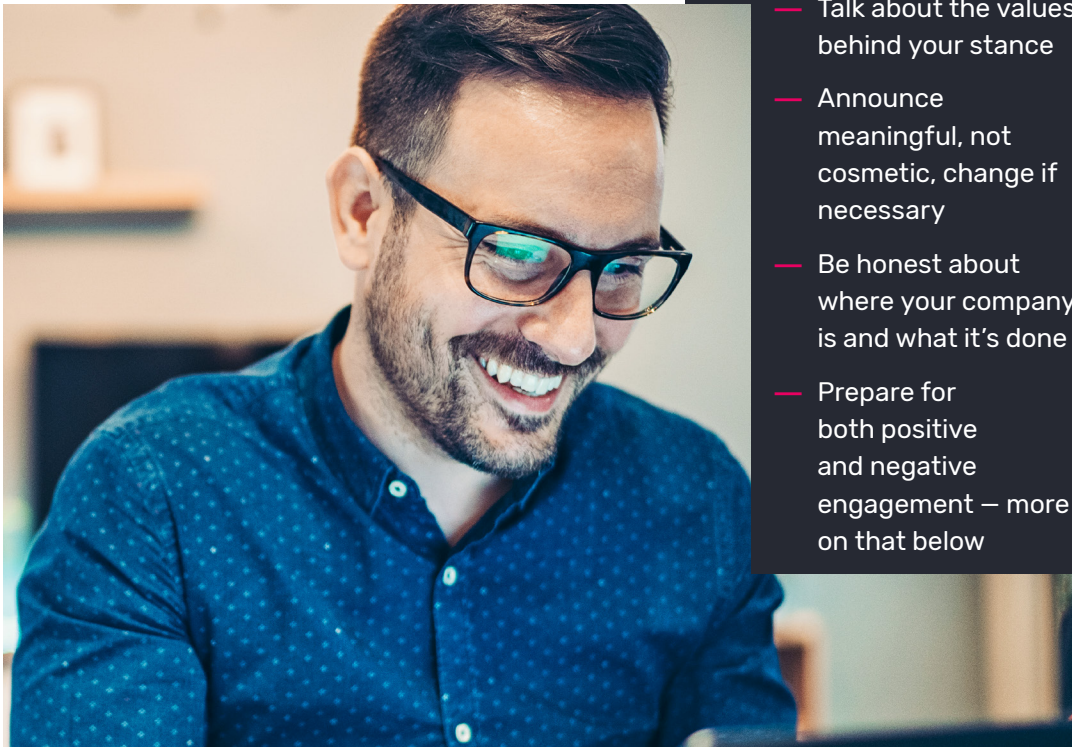
When choosing whether to join a conversation on a particular topic, as yourself the following questions:

- Is the issue relevant to my industry?
- Do we regularly post about current events?
- Have we ever addressed the issue before?
- What actions, if any, is our company taking to address the issue?
- Where does our customer base stand on the issue?
- Does this issue align with our company culture and values?



Planning Your Content

Although posting this type of content often needs to happen quickly, in response to breaking news, you still need a plan like you do with any kind of content. There are some standards you can set as a company that will apply regardless of the issue. Create a plan that you can pull out when you need it.



What to Post

Follow these guidelines for knowing what to post.

- Get the facts so you can stand behind your message
- Keep it relevant to your brand and community
- Avoid grandiosity and platitudes
- Talk about the values behind your stance
- Announce meaningful, not cosmetic, change if necessary
- Be honest about where your company is and what it's done
- Prepare for both positive and negative engagement — more on that below

Responding to Comments

When your brand wades into sensitive conversations, people will undoubtedly voice their thoughts — for better or worse. Before you begin, set guidelines for how you will respond to inflammatory comments on your social media pages.

- Unless a comment contains a false allegation or threat of violence, don't delete it.
- Reply to a negative comment with an invitation to take the conversation to DM or another mode of communication.
- Thank people for their positive responses.
- Personalize responses; avoid using a stock response that you copy and paste.
- Monitor the conversation 24/7 using social listening tools so that you don't miss anything someone posts about your company.

Maintain Your Commitment

Issues come and go from the headlines, but once your brand takes a stand on an issue, you should stand by it. These are some ways you can keep the conversation going and avoid **brand hypocrisy**.

- Follow up on your announcements; keep your constituency updated.
- Ensure future posts are consistent with the stand you have taken.
- Engage with your audience and consider any suggestions they offer.
- Continue to monitor the issue.
- If new information emerges or you discover you have misspoken, hold yourself accountable.

Supporting Your Retailers on Sensitive Topics

As a national brand, the retailers who sell your products in local markets reflect on your company. When taking a stand on an issue, your brand should be proactive and inform your retailers detailing your position. Depending on what that position is, they might advise stores to weigh in or not. Provide support to retailers who agree, sharing branded material and messaging points. It's best to ask those who don't agree to refrain from comment.



"...help retailers tremendously by sharing your content with them..."

Remember, however, a retail business may choose to comment anyway, so you may need to consider how you will respond if a retailer causes controversy. Working together on messaging is especially important for franchisors, where consumers may not differentiate between your brand and the franchise. Prepare for backlash, such as CrossFit experienced when 300 of their gyms dropped

the CrossFit name after the company's CEO tweeted racist remarks.

It's always a good idea to establish strong relationships with retailers and franchises with regard to social media and marketing standards. With your national or international resources, you help retailers tremendously by sharing your content with them and by amplifying their messages.

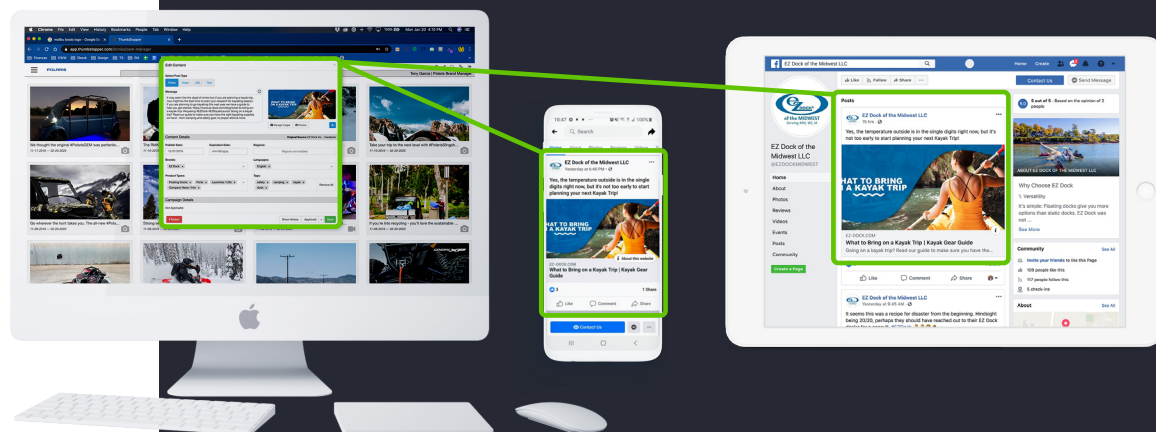
Taking a Stand Doesn't Mean Neglecting Your Overall Strategy

Whatever happens in the news, it's important to continue keeping your product visible. Stick with your strategy — unless something becomes inappropriate. (Corona faced **backlash** for their hard seltzer marketing campaign in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic). Your retailers are still counting on you to promote your brands.

Retailers Need You

While expressing your brand values as the national or international level, you can still reach local audiences via your retailers. Those retailers, especially small independent businesses, often attract customers based on a combination of your brand profile and their visibility to the local community. They need you — but you need them, too.

ThumbStopper facilitates the strong content-sharing relationship you and your local retailers need. The Brand Manager™ platform automates the syndication of your content into the feeds of your retailers. We do the heavy lift of automating your content distribution so your team can stay nimble when social issues arise and you need to focus on brand activism.



With ThumbStopper, content amplification is instantly and consistently accessible, creating better efficiencies for you and better results for your retailers.

Are you ready to see how far your content can go with ThumbStopper? Request your free Brand-to-Local Social Audit to see what your content can really do for your brand