

Is morality marketing right for your brand? (Probably not)

By  Bronwyn Williams

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Morality marketing. Woke-washing. Brand-standing. Jumping on the brand wagon. Whatever you want to call it, companies are increasingly taking the plunge and tying their brands to issues of social justice.



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However, while this trend seems, at first blush, to be benign, even good for society, I would argue that there are very good reasons for a separation of church, brand and state.

For a start, weighing in on controversial social issues is a high-risk strategy. Sure, the rewards can be great, *if* you get it right, and that's a big "if". Call the zeitgeist even slightly wrong and you could end up doing irreparable damage to your brand.

A tale of two takkies

When it comes to morality marketing, the success case study that jumps to mind is that of Nike and its highly popular, award-winning campaigns, starring Caster Semenya and Colin Kaepernick which touched just the right nerve with their target market, aligning the brand with the moral high ground. (Of course, even these campaigns had their [shoe-burning detractors](#), reminding us that when you take a moral stand in advertising, you have to be prepared to take a financial risk, and potentially put your profits in the firing line.)



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However, we tend to be blinded by these rare successful stories and to sweep away the all too common brand-fails when it comes to virtue singling campaigns. Take Adidas. In February this year, the shoe brand decided to honour Black History Month in the USA with a commemorative special edition shoe. Noble intention. Unfortunately, though, the shoe design ultimately chosen for the campaign was an all-white cotton shoe. Given the USA's history of slavery and racial injustice, the choice of design showed a clear lack of foresight, sensitivity and common sense - and the market was [unforgiving](#) of the mistake.

Calvin Klein also missed the mark in its recent campaign starring virtual influencer Lil Miquela kissing real-life supermodel Bella Hadid. The campaign was clearly supposed to show how “woke” the Calvin Klein brand is, by depicting both digisexuality and a lesbian relationship. However, once again, the brand fell down on the details: Bella Hadid identifies as heterosexual and the LGBTQIA community condemned the campaign [for not selecting a representative lesbian model for the role](#).

And that's the trick: when it comes to morality marketing, subtleties and minor details are major issues. Getting an issue “basically” right will not win you any friends or favours.

Do customers even really care?

And then there is the question, after all that, if consumers actually care about purpose-driven brands. Sure they *claim* to care (according to the recent [Havas Global survey](#) 87% of Generation Z consumers claim that they want the brands they support and work for to be “meaningful” 77% of all consumers claim that they expect the brands they support to reflect their personal values), however, consumer actions tell a different story.

Consumers claim to want to wear ethical fashion, however the [fast-fashion industry is growing faster than ever](#).

Consumers claim that they support Nike because of the brand's moral stand on political issues, however many of the same consumers seem happy to turn a blind eye to the [working conditions of the people who make the brand's shoes](#). Other consumers are critical of Nike's supposed hypocrisy, regarding the issue of sweatshops. This shows, once again, that morality marketing places your brand on a pedestal and opens your company up to increased scrutiny.



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As the saying goes, people in glass houses shouldn't show stones. If you take the risk on a morality marketing strategy, you need to make very, very sure that your entire house is in order.

At the end of the day, based on the evidence at hand, morality marketing gone wrong is more likely to harm your brand

than morality marketing is done right is to help your brand.

So, if you ask me, morality marketing is a high risk, high reward strategy, and as such, it is probably not the right strategy for your middle of the road mass-consumer brand. But since I know you are probably going to do attempt to do it anyway (because, of course, *your* brand *completely understands* its target market, unlike all the really big brands who have failed before) I would encourage you to ensure that you really, deeply understand the target market you are trying to appeal to, and still be prepared to get it wrong, despite all your best intentions.

ABOUT BRONWYN WILLIAMS

Futurist, economist and trend analyst. Partner at Flux Trends.

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