

Developing Authentic Corporate Activism Initiatives

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to answer the following question: What factors are most important to consider when creating a corporate stance on social justice movements? Studies have found that consumers are increasingly keeping an eye on what statements companies put out on hot-button socio-political issues. In addition, the rise of cancel culture and increasing ability of social media to disseminate backlash for certain corporate activism efforts has produced public relations crises for some companies and their leadership. At the same time, companies that have engaged in corporate activism have seen minimal impact financially to this point. The impacts of corporate activism on a company have so far produced mixed results, so how these impacts are weighed within corporations becomes a particularly peculiar question, especially with more and more companies engaging in such practices. Research for this paper includes defining key terms such as corporate activism and cancel culture. In addition, research includes the evaluation of case studies and statistics about corporate activism and its impacts on companies, as well as an interview with a public relations professional who has experience with corporate activism from multiple perspectives. Finally, research will attempt to identify and understand key themes in business thought processes regarding corporate activism. After evaluating the facts and making a series of inferences based on these facts, the expected conclusion is that companies should take into account cancel culture and consumer beliefs when creating social justice messaging, but that the company should ultimately come up with a statement that matches the company's values and practices.

Introduction

For most of the 21st century, corporate activism and corporate social responsibility have been key components of business operations all over the world. Companies work to better the communities they are in and advocate for certain issues. However, businesses are facing an hour of reckoning. As politics become more divided and social justice movements take the country by storm, businesses are being looked at to make powerful statements on where they stand on these issues and candidates. “Now, consumers and employees are raising the bar. The killing of George Floyd by a white police officer in Minneapolis has driven one of the largest protest movements in recent memory, and the widespread reactions to the standard CSR playbook suggest that old best practices may no longer work. Consumers and employees are now looking for more than Corporate Social Responsibility — they’re looking for what I call Corporate Social Justice” (Zheng, 2020). The rise of cancel culture has raised the stakes even more for companies when it comes to putting out social justice statements and campaigns around these issues. Consumer response, including cancel culture, is just one of the many considerations that companies must take into account when trying to construct their messaging on social justice issues. The issue is that there are a number of other factors in addition to cancel culture that organizations must consider when creating statements about sociopolitical issues and political candidates.

The question at issue in this paper is to determine exactly what factors are most important for businesses to consider when constructing corporate social justice messaging. One of these potential answers is that cancel culture and the fear of taking a financial and image hit are the biggest factors that push companies to construct their messages in a certain way. Another potential answer is that businesses follow the money, and that their corporate social justice

messaging is most strongly influenced by what message they think could get them the most gain financially. A third potential outcome is that businesses are guided mostly by their corporate values when it comes to decision-making on how to construct a corporate social justice message. The final possible outcome is that businesses should focus on the values of their employees and consumers. This paper will first look at defining key terms such as corporate activism, cancel culture, and corporate values. It will then look at the statistics surrounding corporate activism. In addition, this paper will look at other factors that business leadership considers such as employee sentiments, stakeholder relations, and corporate values through case studies of high-profile instances of corporate activism. Finally, this paper will explore a variety of answers to the question of what factors are most important for a company to consider when creating social justice messaging. Plenty of information is available regarding corporate activism and corporate social justice messaging. In the next section, this paper will dig into the statistics and case studies surrounding corporate activism and social justice messaging in order to set the scene for drawing the appropriate conclusions and recommendations.

Literature Review

Key Terms and Concepts

Before diving into statistics and case studies, there are a few key terms and ideas surrounding corporate social justice messaging that need to be identified and understood. The first concept is corporate activism, which can best be defined as companies taking a stand on socio-political issues that are prominent in society (Corstens, 2019). Corporate activism has become a big trend in the last decade or so as issues become more contentious and consumers look to businesses to take a stand for what they believe is right. There are countless examples of

corporate activism, but some of the most recognizable have come in the past decade. Nike has continuously engaged in corporate activism efforts around social justice, and popular food producer Kellogg's pulled ads from conservative news website Breitbart (Padmanabhan, 2018). Corporate activism stems from the broader concept of corporate social responsibility, which is the idea that companies should be responsible members of the communities that they operate in by making a variety of contributions and operating responsibly (Kim, 2020, p. 1). More recently, there has been a call for a more intense and focused type of corporate activism. "Corporate Social Justice is a reframing of CSR that centers the focus of any initiative or program on the measurable, lived experiences of groups harmed and disadvantaged by society. CSR is a self-regulated framework that has no legal or social obligation for corporations to actually create positive impact for the groups they purport to help."

The second key term is corporate values, which are the shared ideals and standards held by those within a business entity which serve to direct the organization's operations and clarify its identity (Lencioni, 2002). Corporate values have always been something that exists within organizations; however, they have become more and more important as consumers start to look beyond the product and into what a brand stands for. According to a study conducted by Accenture, 62% of consumers said that their purchasing decisions are influenced by a company's ethical values and the authenticity of those values (Norton, 2018). Corporate values inform how the company operates in the communities it calls home, as well as how those within the company are expected to interact with each other. A company that is extremely well-known for its corporate values is Patagonia, as it has recently shifted its values from simply having no negative impact on the environment to working to save the environment (Sonsev, 2019). A more regional example of a company that is widely recognized for its corporate values is Northeast

supermarket chain Wegmans, who have had a strong reputation for years because they consistently follow their corporate values (Ciment, 2019).

The final key term to define in cancel culture, best be defined as “the process of banding together to publicly shame celebrities, corporations, or movements that are deemed by some to be offensive -- not only to demand an apology or seek some form of accountability but squeezing the business or personality financially.” (McKay, 2020). Cancel culture is an extremely recent phenomenon and its effectiveness as a way of making people aware of their wrongdoing or lack of political correctness is highly debated. Many prominent politicians, including former President of the United States, Barack Obama, have spoken out against cancel culture. ““This idea of purity and you're never compromised and you're always politically 'woke' and all that stuff. You should get over that quickly. The world is messy, there are ambiguities. People who do really good stuff have flaws. People who you are fighting may love their kids. And share certain things with you”” (Cillizza, 2019). Cancel culture first came to fruition with the #MeToo movement after Hollywood star Harvey Weinstein was exposed for multiple sexual assault allegations and activists moved to have Weinstein removed from his role (Lewis, 2020). This movement continued when Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem in his final season in the NFL in 2016 and many conservative voices across politics sought to get him removed from the National Football League, and even threatened to boycott the NFL when more players joined Kaepernick in protests to draw attention to this issue of police brutality committed against people of color (Wilson, 2017). Cancel culture offers a prime example of a double standard because those trying to cancel one company or individual will often criticize those who move to cancel a company or individual they support. One prime example of this is President Donald Trump openly calling out Nike for their social justice campaign (Trump, 2018), while

criticizing his opponents who attempted to impose cancel culture on Goya when the CEO appeared at an event at the Trump White House and praised his leadership during the COVID pandemic (Andrews, 2020)

The most important key concept to establish is the concept of social justice, particularly in today's United States. Today's social justice movements are multifaceted and have three major areas of focus: minority rights and equality, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transexual, and Queer (LGBTQ+) rights and equality, and women's rights and equality. The focus of this paper will look at two specific areas of social justice: The Black Lives Matter social justice movement that began in 2013 and found a renewed spirit in the wake of George Floyd's death at the hands of police officer Derek Chauvin, and the push for equality and inclusivity for the LGBTQ+ community. While the Black Lives Matter movement addresses issues such as economic policy, recognition of all individuals and their identities, and more, its main focus is on identifying and addressing systemic racism in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, as well as the nation-wide issues of police brutality (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). Also addressed in the Black Lives Matter movement is the issue of inclusivity and equality for the LGBTQ+ community, which has been going on since the AIDS epidemic ravaged the community under former President Ronald Reagan's administration. The movement for inclusivity and equality for the LGBTQ+ community has seen a number of victories over the years, including the landmark supreme court case *Obergefell* in 2015 which made gay marriage legal in all 50 states. Activists in this camp are still pushing for anti-discrimination laws that ensure LGBTQ+ individuals can't be turned away from businesses due to their identity, as well as the full acceptance of individuals who identify as transgender.

The Facts on Corporate Activism and Social Justice Messaging

Today, corporate activism and corporate social justice messaging are seen as crucial to how organizations, particularly big businesses and professional leagues, operate. According to one study 56% of Americans say they want to see organizations take a stand on hot-button socio-political issues like abortion and LGBTQ+ issues (Global Strategy Group [GSG], 2014, p. 2). This is a clear indicator that consumers want to see corporate activism and corporate social justice messaging from the companies that they follow, and from companies with high profiles. This study was backed up by an earlier Global Strategy Group study which surveyed participants about their feelings about companies taking a stand overall, and not necessarily on strictly hot-button issues. The results showed that 72% of Americans believe that companies should take action to address pressing societal issues, and 78% believe that companies should address issues that face their industry in particular (McCarthy, 2013, p. 1).

Some argue that the desire for organizations to engage in corporate social justice responsibility also means that consumers will make purchasing decisions accordingly to what statements organizations put out. This argument is an exhibit of a false cause because it implies a causal relationship between consumers wanting to see corporate social justice efforts and consumers informing their purchasing decisions on these efforts even though the data says otherwise. While corporate activism and corporate social justice messaging are clearly activities that consumers want to see businesses engage in, there is a big disparity in what they want to see and how it impacts their behavior as consumers. Only 8.1% of U.S. adults said that they would not be more likely to buy from a company that engaged in corporate activism or put out social justice messaging that matched their own views (Data Freaks, 2015). Likewise, only 8.4% said

they would be less likely to buy from a company that engages in corporate activism that they disagree with (Data Freaks, 2015).

Another layer of corporate activism that is worth noting is the concept of CEO activism, which is when CEOs openly endorse political candidates or take sides on an issue on behalf of a company. More recently, this phenomenon has picked up as CEOs take stances on issues that aren't related to their company's bottom line (Chatterji, 2018). While CEO activism can be productive as these individuals often have seats at the table in some government affairs where change can be made, it is important to note that only 29% of Americans believe the practice of CEO activism is appropriate (McCarthy, 2013, p. 2).

Taking a step back to the more general subject of corporate social responsibility, it is clear that any efforts by a company to engage in corporate social responsibility, including corporate social justice, must come across as authentic and be backed up by the organization's own actions. According to Songmi Kim and Heejung Lee (2020), authenticity in corporate social responsibility means "recognizing and believing that an act is derived from sincerely caring for others rather than deriving from duty or responsibility [11]. CSR authenticity refers to consumers' actual trust in CSR behavior [15] and is considered an important factor influencing the evaluation of CSR activities [16,17]. In other words, consumers' high appreciation of the company's CSR authenticity refers to the fact that the company's CSR activities are not a part of the pursuit of corporate profits, but rather a genuine act of consideration and concern for various stakeholders" (p. 2). The study concluded that consumers are more likely to see a corporate social responsibility campaign as authentic if the campaign is tied to the company's core activities and operations (Kim, 2020, p. 7).

Not only is corporate social responsibility important for consumers, but employees as well. This is particularly true for Millennials and Gen-Z employees, the vast majority of whom would prefer to work for companies that have a positive impact on the communities they operate in (Deloitte, 2020, p. 15). On the issue of inclusivity in the workplace, the same survey found that Millennial and Gen Z employees also overwhelmingly said that they want to work in a diverse and inclusive workplace (2020, p. 15). This is important to note because the perceptions of business of these two groups is on a steep downward trend, dropping from 76% viewing businesses as a force for good three years ago to only 41% in the wake of coronavirus and mass social justice movements (Deloitte, 2020, p. 19). This means that there is a disconnect for workers in the corporate social activism efforts of companies on social media and how they go about their business operation. It begs the question of whether or not the corporate social justice efforts that companies have been engaging in increasingly often are actually authentic, or if they are simply marketing ploys meant to bring in money and avoid the wrath of cancel culture. This sentiment is echoed by consumers, as evidenced in a study by an Edelman Trust Barometer study in 2017 which found that consumer confidence in businesses has also fallen in the past few years after a long period of increase (Harrington, 2017).

Corporate Activism and Social Justice Messaging Case Studies

Nike

In 2018, Nike released what would become a controversial and polarizing ad campaign centered around the business's signature slogan "Just Do It." The ad featured several prominent athletes of color including Serena Williams, LeBron James, and controversial former NFL star Colin Kaepernick. The underlying message of the campaign had to do with racial injustice across

the United States, an issue which had reared its ugly head due to a number of cases of police brutality across the country in the few years leading up to the launch of the campaign.

Nike's "Just Do It." campaign became a highly politicized issue due to the inclusion of Colin Kaepernick as a cover person. Kaepernick had recently been blacklisted in the NFL for starting a movement in which players took a knee during the national anthem to draw attention to racial injustice and police brutality in the United States. His actions drew praise from many on the left side of the political spectrum, while those on the right attacked the star for what they perceived as an action that disrespected the flag, and current service members and veterans. This led the reactions to Nike's campaign to be split along a similar divide, with liberals supporting Nike and backlash coming from conservatives.

In the wake of the campaign being released, conservative backlash included social media calls to boycott Nike products, consumers burning Nike products they already owned, and even stark criticism on Twitter from U.S. President Donald Trump. In the immediate aftermath of the blowback, Nike's stock dropped 2.8% (Atkinson, 2018). Despite this initial drop, the company recovered in the stock market and its sales never wavered. In the remainder of the year, Nike's stock value rose by 30% (Atkinson, 2018). Even with conservative calls to boycott the brand, Nike also saw online sales jump by 31% in the four days following the launch of the ad campaign and got \$43 million worth of media exposure within 24 hours of the campaign's debut (Kotler, 2018).

So, what does Nike consider to be most important when it comes to corporate activism and social justice messaging? New CEO John Donahoe cites multiple reasons, one being what Nike's athletes want the company to stand for. In the same interview he made that statement,

Donahoe added that Nike tries to stick to issues that are related to the company's "core focus" (Ciment, 2020).

Ben & Jerry's

The famous Vermont ice cream brand Ben & Jerry's burst into the corporate activism and social justice messaging movement in 2020 in the wake of the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and a number of other African American citizens at the hands of the police. On their social media platforms, Ben & Jerry's released succinct and powerful statements that talked about identifying and dismantling systemic racism in American. Their message: "WE MUST DISMANTLE WHITE SUPREMACY" (Ben & Jerry's, 2020). This statement in a graphic was accompanied by the caption "The murder of George Floyd was the result of inhumane police brutality that is perpetuated by a culture of white supremacy" (Ben & Jerry's, 2020).

Across social media, Ben & Jerry's drew a lot of attention, much like Nike. Ben & Jerry's made it clear in subsequent interviews and posts that their social justice messaging stemmed from their corporate values, which were available on their website. To tie it all together, Ben & Jerry's tied their statement back to the specific corporate values that they were derived from (Solis, 2020).

The company's activism also goes beyond just social media. Ben & Jerry's has attempted to reflect the values communicated in their activism efforts in the way they operate. They do so through ethical sourcing of products and supporting their employees with living wages (Solis, 2020). They've also made their products a part of the efforts, using puns about sociopolitical issues to name some of their flavors such as "Empower Mint," which celebrated the anniversary of the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v Board of Education* (Ben & Jerry's, 2018).

Starbucks

In the midst of a summer full of Black Lives Matter protests in 2020, Starbucks made a move that pushed it to the forefront of the news cycle. The popular coffee chain first made headlines when it barred its employees from wearing articles of Black Lives Matter clothing while they were working, citing a concern over those who might twist the organization's message (Allaire, 2020). Liberal activists quickly moved to invoke cancel culture, taking to social media to express their disappointment in Starbucks.

What makes Starbucks different from the previous two case studies is that this time, cancel culture worked. Just days after it started to receive blowback, Starbucks did a full 180 by announcing it would not only allow employees to wear clothing in support of Black Lives Matter, but it would also design a shirt for employees (Allaire, 2020). Some in the company have questioned the motives behind Starbucks creating apparel, as it is a means for the company to generate revenue and spread its brand (Valinsky, 2020). While Starbucks is certainly engaging in corporate social justice messaging, the authenticity of their social justice efforts is questionable due to the fact that they only changed course once they felt threatened by cancel culture.

Beyond allowing employees to express their support for Black Lives Matter, Starbucks has also pledged to donate \$1 million in support of "organizations promoting racial equity and more inclusive and just communities" (Starbucks, 2020). Despite the large sum of money, activists are again approaching the effort with skepticism because the company is worth so much money (Allaire, 2020). Ultimately, Starbucks' quick reversal of their position on employees expressing their support for Black Lives Matter left many questioning what exactly the message was that the company was trying to send about their views on the movement.

The waters for Starbucks are further muddied by the fact that Starbucks faced a crisis in 2018 when an employee in a Pennsylvania location called the cops on two African American

men who were waiting for a friend to arrive. In the wake of a clear racial bias issue, Starbucks shut down thousands of stores nation-wide and put more than 100,00 employees through racial bias training (Calfas, 2018). However, according to a number of employees, and employees of color in-particular, the training did not teach anything new and never truly addressed how to go about situations like the one that arose in Pennsylvania (Calfas, 2018).

Chick-fil-A

Chick-fil-A has been in the national spotlight since the early 2010's when CEO Dan Cathy made homophobic comments regarding the definition of marriage. His statements were amplified when it was discovered that his family and Chick-fil-A donated millions to anti-LGBTQ+ organizations (McDowell, 2020). Chick-fil-A presents an interesting case study because it is a clear example of CEO activism mixed with corporate activism. Further complicating the matter is the fact that Chick-fil-A locations are franchised, so owners of individual franchises might not hold the same views as Cathy. For activists to assume that all individual chain owners share the exact same views as Cathy is a hasty generalization of those in the company. Another reason that Chick-fil-A presents an interesting case study is the controversy surrounding the relationship between homosexuality and Christianity, as Christian faiths have routinely rejected ideas such as marriage equality.

How does this relate to Chick-fil-A? The Cathy family is well-known as a very religious family. For example, Cathy's father purposely made sure the restaurant was closed on Sunday's in the name of Christianity and the day of worship (McDowell, 2020). The root of Chick-fil-A's corporate values are in Christian faith, but Cathy claims that it is only his family's views on marriage that do not agree with gay marriage, not the entire company's. "Dan T. Cathy released a statement in 2011 following the accusations that Chick-fil-A was anti-LGBTQ, saying, 'In

recent weeks, we have been accused of being anti-gay. We have no agenda against anyone. At the heart and soul of our company, we are a family business that serves and values all people regardless of their beliefs or opinions. We seek to treat everyone with honor, dignity, and respect and believe in the importance of loving your neighbor as yourself.' Cathy continued, saying, 'While my family and I believe in the Biblical definition of marriage, we love and respect anyone who disagrees ... Chick-fil-A's Corporate Purpose is 'To glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us, and to have a positive influence on all who come in contact with Chick-fil-A.' As a result, we will not champion any political agendas on marriage and family'" (McDowell, 2020).

Despite Cathy's efforts to clarify his positions and the company's, Chick-fil-A has been the target of cancel culture for the better part of the past decade. Liberal activists have made countless calls to boycott Chick-fil-A over the complications surrounding Cathy and Chick-fil-A's donations to anti-LGBTQ+ religious organizations. Despite attempts by members of the political left to impact Chick-fil-A financially through cancel culture, Chick-fil-A has continued to grow, climbing up to third place on the list of largest food chains in the United States in 2018 (Yilek, 2019).

Methods

An interview was conducted with a public relations professional who has worked in multiple fields over a 21-year career. The interview took place on Sunday, November 22, 2020 via Zoom from 5:00 PM EST until 6:30 PM EST. The interview participant has been guaranteed full anonymity in answering the questions. The interview participant gave consent for their responses to be included in this paper with no additional conditions. There were eight questions

asked in the interview, some prepared beforehand and some follow-up questions. Those questions are available in Appendix A at the end of the paper. The interview participant graduated from the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications at Syracuse University, and currently holds an executive role at a research institute where they started over the summer of 2020. They have also held top communications roles at a television network for more than a decade. Beyond their professional work, the participant has also been a rape crisis counselor and advocate at numerous locations in the United States. The reason for selecting this individual as the interview participant is that they have experience on the corporate side of corporate activism and corporate social justice messaging, which is a crucial perspective for this paper. More importantly, they also have extensive experience on the advocacy and activism side of corporate activism and corporate social justice. Their particular experience with these activities during the time of the #MeToo movement builds their credibility to talk about corporate activism and social justice messaging. This is due to the recency and scope of that movement, which had tremendous impacts in generating corporate social justice messaging on the issue of sexual harassment and violence, as well as the way in which the movement forced many organizations to come to some type of reckoning with some of their leadership and/or business operations.

Findings

Overall, the interview participant felt strongly that corporate activism and corporate social justice messaging need to relate back to an organization's mission and values. The mission and values include the identity the organization wants to establish and maintain, and also how they operate within the communities they are represented in. For example, at their previous role, they implemented an ambassador program with historically black colleges and universities, as well as "commuter schools," in order to give students opportunities in the events industry that

they might not have had access to before. The participant said that the organization repeatedly selected applicants from well-off families, and often overlooked highly qualified applicants who didn't have connections. The organization was working on racial diversity and inclusion in its operations, this initiative was one way in which it engaged in a social justice-rooted corporate activism initiative that related to that mission.

To add to these points, the participant emphasized that organizations need to understand their audience when creating corporate activism and corporate social justice messaging too. They used the example of Cabela's, an outdoor recreation retailer whose target audience consists of those who enjoy things like hiking, fishing, and hunting. For Cabela's the participant says that their audience would likely be more inclined to embrace corporate activism and justice messaging about the environment or hunting and fishing ethics as opposed to issues regarding the LGBTQ+ community.

One important point that the participant made is that when it comes to corporate activism and corporate social justice messaging there are two perspectives. The corporate perspective, which takes into account a variety of business factors like target audience and organizational operations, is often the dominant perspective that organizations take. The idealistic perspective, which has the good of the people and what is right in mind, is the perspective which has become somewhat ignored or distorted as the messengers (organizations) pander to different target audiences. They say that organizations, particularly large corporations like Nike and Starbucks, try to balance the two perspectives, which can create disconnect and inauthenticity.

The participant actually had a recent experience with this at their old employer. The participant was able to play a large role in coordinating a recognition of women who wanted to stand strong together as a part of the #MeToo movement in 2018. This event was a clear example

of corporate activism and corporate social justice messaging as the company was clearly standing with these women who had been through such traumatic experiences. In planning the event, the participant and the organization took great pride in making sure that they made this experience as powerful as possible for the brave women who came forward by having resources such as a trauma crisis team, post-event support and security for the women, previewing and fine-tuning the language used in speeches and videos to make sure it was appropriate and would not create any triggers, and making a concerted effort to train the media attending on how to approach interviews with these survivors professionally. By doing this event the right way, the participant and the organization were engaging in an idealistic perspective of corporate activism and corporate social justice messaging. However, beyond this event there was a lot more of the corporate perspective on corporate activism and corporate social responsibility when it came to inclusivity for women in the workplace. The participant spent seven years trying to get their former employer to adopt a “violence language guide,” and it took giving a presentation on it to their department along with the support of a woman who had been promoted to get the guide and presentation implemented company wide. Why did it take so long? According to the participant, it’s because on issues of sexual harassment and violence organizations are hesitant to speak up because they risk facing accountability for things that have happened there in the past. This is exactly the case with their former employer, which faced backlash after comments made on-air by a prominent figure in the organization, who they ended up just moving to a different channel. What we see here is the corporate perspective, which took into account how the organization recognized that it hasn’t always operated in a way that addressed the issue of sexual harassment and violence in the workplace and stalled action and messaging on the issue in part because of that.

The interview participant's view on corporate activism and corporate social justice was shaped by their career with the television network for sure, but they made sure to note that their work as a rape crisis counselor and their new role at the research institute have also been extremely important in how they view corporate activism and social justice. Despite only serving in their role at the research institute for a few months, the participant said that the research they have conducted and the conversations that they have had have shown them that there is such a disconnect between workplaces and the true purpose of corporate activism and corporate social justice messaging. In their work they have looked at the ways in which organizations often ignore the wider scope of things. A specific example they gave is how women doing unpaid work as caregivers at home drives the economy, especially amidst this pandemic, so that men can go to work, which perpetuates the wage gap because statistically men make more than women, so in order to have a larger income for their family, the man stays at work while the woman stays home to take care of the kids who are stuck at home. The issue is even more exaggerated for single mothers who have to work, but don't earn enough to find childcare. They say that organizations can talk all they want about supporting women in the workplace and in society and fighting for gender equality, but the situation in real life shows how their messaging is just that. Very few organizations engage in real change both internally and externally that helps support working women. Their experience as a rape crisis counselor has led them to double down on this view, and they really stressed the importance of acting on corporate social justice messaging to create truly authentic and effective corporate activism.

One last key point that the interview participant made is that organizations really have to consider their long-term engagement in the issue at the focus of their activism and social justice messaging. This is not only important because the issue should relate to their organizational

operations, mission, and values, but also because the process of engaging in activism and creating messaging is a constant learning process. They stressed that true change makes messaging authentic and powerful, and that true change can only come from continuously engaging in conversation with those impacted by what the messaging is addressing and continuing to learn about the issue. This is especially important as the connections between a lot of issues identified by corporate social justice messaging becomes increasingly connected and activism efforts are starting to focus on intersectionality. They say that this is one of the biggest issues facing organizations pushing for real change, particularly at their old employer where 30-plus year professionals who hadn't really made many significant changes were the ones tasked with leading change in the times of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter.

Recommendations

Corporate activism has evolved over the course of the past decade, and the more specific concept of corporate social justice has evolved from it. This new school corporate activism focuses on addressing societal issues faced by disadvantaged or minority communities, and consumers are starting to expect to see it out of their favorite companies, as the Global Strategy Group (2013, 2014) points out. As social issues like race and LGBTQ+ rights come into the spotlight more and more, companies will have to make statements on these issues. The phenomenon of cancel culture has made the stakes even higher. Even though a study conducted by Data Freaks (2015) suggests that fewer than 10% of consumers would actually be impacted by whether or not they agree with a company's corporate social justice messaging, companies can still face massive public perception crises when activists take to social media and criticize the company. The threat of cancel culture can then beg the question of whether or not corporate

social justice messaging is authentic or if it is merely consumer appeasement. Consumers and employees alike want to see companies reflect their corporate social justice messaging in their values and business practices, but it is clear that these groups do not believe that most businesses truly practice what they are preaching in their messaging. Thus, confidence in businesses to actually push change in society has dropped dramatically over the course of the past few years, as is shown in the studies conducted by Deloitte (2020) and the Edelman Trust Barometer (2017).

Companies like Nike, Ben & Jerry's, and Chick-fil-A have continuously turned to their corporate values to create their corporate social justice messaging. Nike and Ben & Jerry's specifically have reflected their messaging in their practices. According to Ciment (2020), Nike looks to its athletes to help determine what their messaging consists of and CEO John Donahue made it clear that they would focus on issues related to their business operations. Ben & Jerry's (2018) has dedicated entire pages on their website to corporate social justice messaging and how it relates to their values, even going so far as to name flavors to recognize social justice initiatives and highlighting those on their website. Beyond ice cream flavors, Solis (2020) points out that Ben & Jerry's has reflected their corporate social justice initiatives in their corporate practices by doing things such as paying employees a living wage. Despite backlash for some of their corporate and CEO activism, McDowell (2020) emphasizes that Chick-fil-A's activism efforts also reflect the company's values which are rooted in the Christian faith of founder S. Truett Cathy. On the other hand, companies like Starbucks have shown that their messaging follows the almighty dollar, giving in to cancel culture to appease consumers and avoid financial hits. Even though Starbucks never said this specifically, their actions in response to the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 reflects it. Particularly, Valinsky (2020) points out that their

reversal of their decision to ban employees from wearing Black Lives Matter apparel generated suspicion that the decision was motivated by the potential financial gain of Black Lives Matter apparel with the Starbucks logo on it.

Based on the information above, there are a few layers to this paper's recommendations for companies when creating corporate social justice messaging. The first recommendation is that companies do not focus on just one factor when creating their messaging. A variety of research on the topic shows that consumer opinions, employee opinions, and corporate values are all important factors to take into consideration. In addition, the ability of the company to deliver authentic messaging by practicing what they preach is an extremely important factor in how a company constructs corporate social justice messaging. What companies should not do is develop corporate social justice messaging with the threat of cancel culture and financial impacts at the forefront of their minds. The Global Strategy Group studies (2013, 2014), which show cancel culture as an insignificant threat to the financial stability of organizations, are more than enough to move this consideration to the backburner.

Corporate values are the first important factor for an organization to consider when creating corporate social justice messaging. It is clear that employees believe corporate values are extremely important, especially Millennial and Gen-Z employees who make up an increasing portion of the workforce. In addition, a majority of consumers also prefer companies who have strong corporate values. In addition, the authenticity of corporate social justice messaging relies on how it relates to a company's core values amongst other things. Looking at the case studies, Ben & Jerry's and Nike are two companies who looked heavily at their corporate values to create their corporate social justice messaging. While it is too early to tell if Ben & Jerry's has seen any financial impact from its values-based corporate social justice messaging, Nike's campaign

involving Colin Kaepernick led to strong financial showings for the company in a number of statistics, proving that a values-based campaign will be well-received and perceived as authentic. The interview participant clearly stated that activism and messaging need to relate to the organization's mission and values in order to come across as authentic because it is something the company can then focus on and continue to learn about over time in order to create actual substantive change.

The next important consideration for companies looking to create corporate social justice messaging is whether or not the company is practicing what they preach. Ben & Jerry's is the best example of this. When they released their response to the Black Lives Matter movement, there was really nowhere to question Ben & Jerry's commitment to engaging in corporate social responsibility initiatives that matched their messaging (Solis, 2020). On the other hand, Starbucks reversal of action left many consumers wondering what exactly their message was, and the donation they made only slightly cleared things up. This is further complicated by the fact that many don't perceive Starbucks as actually taking action on issues of race due to their failure to respond to a racial bias incident in one of their stores with adequate training and reflection (Calfas, 2018). By giving the second most weight to whether or not they actually practice what their corporate social justice messaging is teaching, companies can ensure that their messaging comes off as authentic and thus is successful, avoiding backlash and truly trying to make change.

The third important consideration that organizations should look at is their consumer base and what those consumers want the organization to address, and what they want them to stay away from. As previously stated, consumers want companies to take a stand on issues, and that is becoming increasingly true as the younger generations create an ever-increasing percentage of

the American consumer pool. McCarthy (2013, p. 1) highlights that 78% of consumers want to see organizations take stances on issues in their industry, and the interview participant corroborated this idea from the organizational perspective. What is important to remember here is that only about half of consumers think organizations should address hot-button issues such as abortion or LGBTQ+ issues, which often might not relate directly to the organization's operations. The interview participant again corroborated this statistic from the organizational perspective. It is important to note that there is a huge difference between considering the consumer base and giving in to cancel culture, as considering the consumer base is proactive and considers the organization's values, whereas considering cancel culture is often reactive and has the potential to ignore the organization's values.

When considering these recommendations, it is important to understand that there are some limitations to the scope of them. The first limitation to consider is that there was no primary research done to generate quantitative data. Any statistics presented came from secondary research, some of which could be slightly dated. Another limitation to consider related to primary research is that only one professional was interviewed, and no focus groups were conducted. This means that the scope of the qualitative data is limited to one person, and the findings rely on interviews conducted by individuals and groups not associated with this paper. Despite these limitations, this paper still provides a strong case to readers for what organizations should consider when creating corporate activism and corporate social justice initiatives.

Conclusions

As social issues like LGBTQ+ rights and racial injustice continue to sit at the forefront of political discussions, consumers and employees alike are looking to organizations to make

statements and engage in initiatives to help address these issues. With cancel culture and financial impacts in the front of the minds of corporate leaders, this messaging can often come off as inauthentic and initiatives face the threat of floundering. However, if organizations create their corporate activism initiatives and corporate social justice messaging based on their corporate values, their ability to practice what they preach long-term, and by listening to their consumer base, corporate activism initiatives and corporate social justice messaging will be authentic and impactful. Cancel culture, though it appears like a true threat to businesses, has shown to be ineffective at harming businesses financially, and most American consumers don't even practice it. Interviews with corporate leaders and public relations professionals, as well as case studies from companies like Nike, Ben & Jerry's, and Chick-fil-A show that strong corporate activism initiatives and corporate social justice messaging are born from corporate values and a commitment to the cause. All of the research and case studies also show that paying attention to what the organization's consumer base is looking for, such as strong statements on socio-political issues, helps build the authenticity of an organization's engagement in corporate activism and corporate social justice messaging. The wide scope of research and sources that have contributed to the findings of this paper show that these findings are viable, and business practice over the past half-decade confirm the findings as well. Corporate activism and corporate social justice messaging are becoming musts for organizations looking to find their place in the current market. If the activism and messaging come from the right places within the organization, they can truly make a name for the organization, and a difference in society down the line.

Appendix A

1. What is your perception of corporate activism and, more specifically, corporate social justice messaging?
2. In your LinkedIn profile you mention that you created a diversity initiative to provide City A-area HBCU students with hands-on, live event experience at the X Awards. Diversity and inclusion have become major points of both activism and corporate practice in recent years. In the process of creating this initiative, what conversations did you have with your colleagues about the importance of creating this initiative and what informed Company A's decision to take up the initiative? How does this initiative reflect Company A's company values?
3. Every year corporations make statements about social issues. However, many of these corporations might not reflect these statements in their operations. According to your LinkedIn, you "Train Company A personnel on the dynamics of sexual/interpersonal violence; helped create first violence language guide for Company A staff and consult across the company on best practices." You also played a large role in establishing X website. How do these initiatives inform Company A's messaging about social issues such as sexual harassment and assault, and gender equality in the workplace? How do these initiatives reflect Company A's company values?
4. In your role at Company A, you spent a lot of time coordinating events such as the Y Awards. In 2018, Company A recognized survivors of sexual assault committed by Larry Nassar. What were the conversations surrounding this recognition, and what informed Company A's decision to recognize the survivors at the Y Awards?

5. You transitioned to your role at the Organization B amidst a new wave of BLM protests during the summer of 2020. Over the summer, Company A gave more airtime to covering issues such as race. Although you were outgoing, could you describe any conversations you were involved in about this shift from Executive A and Executive B's statements, and how it reflects Company A's approach to activism and social justice messaging?
6. Your role at Organization B looks at social issues from a different perspective than your role at Company A did. Organization B conducts research and advocates for policy, while Company A can engage in activism and messaging efforts but might not advocate for certain policy measures. How, if at all, has this changed your perspective on corporate activism and corporate social justice messaging?
7. You also have personally engaged in a great number of advocacy efforts on the issue of sexual assault and domestic violence, including in your role as President of the Board for Non-profit C. How has your advocacy experience informed the way you look at corporate activism and corporate social justice messaging?
8. Based on your overall professional and volunteer experience, what should inform the creation and execution of corporate activism efforts and corporate social justice messaging, particularly from large corporations?

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