



Volunte Six

INSIGHTS +
ACTIONS SERIES

Choosing Your Cause

IN THE AGE OF BRAND ACTIVISM

As consumers become more outspoken about social issues, brands are in a unique position to use their business purpose to effect meaningful change.



Executive Summary

2020 uncovered a new generation of

GLOBAL ACTIVISTS.

From widespread conversations about healthcare reform to Black Lives Matter protests, consumers found their voice through a series of grassroots movements. A large swath of the global population demanded that brands grow in tandem with them and challenged companies to take a stand to demonstrate their active citizenship. As corporate activism became increasingly popular, brands made more efforts than ever to address their position on societal issues.

But many brands took a series of missteps in their journeys to make a difference. The biggest set of issues facing corporate activism can be traced to a lack of clarity around “authenticity.” Highlighted throughout the communications industry as the key characteristic to define successful social impact, many marketing agencies and brands alike have failed to identify the steps to achieve it.

Through in-depth research of social change and a study of current brands’ initiatives, both successful and unsuccessful, we have determined there is a right—and wrong—way to approach brand citizenship. The following pages outline key points that define the path forward.





2020 uncovered a new brand target: the activist consumer.

From healthcare inequities to racial injustices and a shrinking timeline to solve climate change, engaged citizens could no longer turn a blind eye to our global plight.

Using social media to amplify their voices, they joined in a growing activist movement. Some activist consumers began crossing virtual borders to support issues around the world, and even those who were once indifferent to politics began protesting in favor of egalitarianism. ¹

In fact, there was a double digit increase in young people becoming actively involved in social issues within the US in 2020. ²

But despite a growing movement, they often lacked organized support to sustain their impact. ³





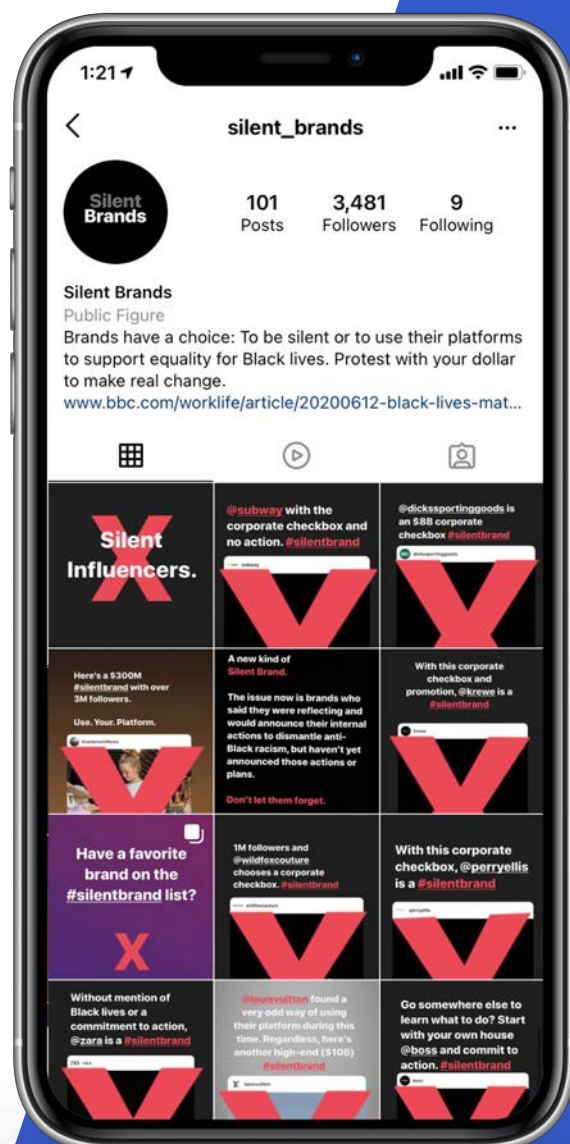
Activist consumers are looking to brands to enact change.

As they searched for organized leadership, those skeptical of their government's ability to effect meaningful change sought it elsewhere: corporations.

From COVID safety measures to the foundation of initiatives like Pull Up For Change, activist consumers challenged brands to evaluate their own roles within society.

Corporations no longer had the ability to remain silent on issues that were previously perceived as "too political." Those that tried to stay out of the spotlight were called out for their lack of initiative.⁴ In fact, 76% of global consumers say they took action in response to a brand doing something they disagreed with, increasing to 88% among Gen Z.⁵ Corporations' indifference was exposed to a newly critical and hyper-aware audience.

"Define your brand of citizenship, or have it redefined at political whim for you," said Elsie Maio, McKinsey Alumna and owner of Humanity, Inc.⁶



Source: @silent_brands



Brands have taken a series of missteps in their journey to do so.

Marketing and advertising professionals have recognized the need for brands to define their citizenship and have latched onto the messaging opportunity at lightning speed. This has spurred a multitude of “impact-driven” campaigns.

These campaigns are the latest effort to connect to an elusive activist audience. Over the past few years, roughly half of Cannes Lions shortlisted submissions were categorized as campaigns that make a difference.⁷

But many of these campaigns remain ineffectual due to four main missteps that detract from authenticity:

1. The brand has a lack of credibility
2. The brand may be conflating corporate donations and brand citizenship
3. The brand fails to define achievable and measurable goals
4. The brand fails to remain consistent in its cause messaging

By addressing these pitfalls, brands can create a more authentic movement that will garner increased support amongst their activist audience.



1. Lack of Credibility

Many brands have created impact-driven campaigns without a deep reflection of their company's credibility on the topic. As a result, **56% of global consumers believe that brands are using social issues as a marketing ploy.**⁸

This lack of credibility occurs when brands identify “impact” opportunities that lack a connection to their larger brand purpose and are not supported through their own internal initiatives. Snack brands, for example, are creating full campaigns about inclusivity while failing to identify the issues that their CPG category can actually affect. Their commercials aim to drive awareness, but leave consumers confused about a snack brand's role in achieving a just and inclusive society.

Terms like greenwashing, pinkwashing and rainbow-washing have entered the lexicon as brands fail to improve their business practices in tandem with their messaging. Annual Pride celebrations have become flooded with commerciality.⁹ Brands tout rainbow Facebook profiles and create limited-time-only Pride products without first identifying opportunities to address diversity within their own companies. When the annual conversation around Pride dies down, oftentimes these companies resume their daily activities without mention of LGBTQIA+ support. “This commercialization dilutes cause messaging into a fleeting fad, reducing the movement's ability to make tangible change.”¹⁰

TLDR

Using social issues as a marketing tactic without having a clearly defined role drives consumer distrust.

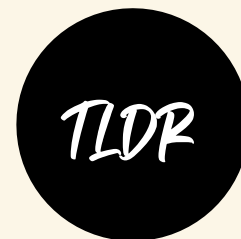
2. Conflating Corporate Donations and Brand Citizenship:

While funding is critical to the success of many social movements, a one-time corporate donation does not confer authenticity because it allows brands to ignore the most impactful ways they can participate in a cause.

Brands and agencies have access to skills and resources that can help recruit participants, scale messaging and engage communities in behavioral change. For a community to feel a brand's direct impact, corporations need to create actionable and creative programming that encourages a cultural shift in the way we perceive and address the issue.

Donations alone may not be as effective because:

- 1 They lead brands to believe they've done enough without engaging in direct community-level action that drives long-term change.^{11,12}
- 2 Consumers do not engage in, nor help scale, this type of impact.
- 3 Donations often constitute less than 1% of overall corporate profits, drawing skepticism about a company's commitment to change.¹³
- 4 The affected community may not connect the brand to the solution, potentially minimizing the ROI for the company.



Relying only on corporate donations as a means of establishing authenticity contributes to brand “slacktivism” and is not always the most effective way to impact a cause.¹⁴

3. Unmeasurable Goals

Many brands have not defined SMART campaign metrics for social impact work.

Some are attempting to tackle global issues such as climate change, inequality for the LGBTQIA+ community or AAPI hate without specific and reportable KPIs. Brands should narrow their focus, choosing a specific cause within the larger topic to target. They should then define social KPIs to guide the campaign creative. While awareness is pertinent to many social issues and can drive impact, we encourage brands to dig deeper to understand if there are more action-oriented metrics that are better suited to address the issue.

Social KPI Examples:

Awareness:

Increase in social conversation around the issue

Legislative Action:

Increase in petitions signed

Behavioral Change:

Increased participation in said activity



Creating a cause campaign without clearly defined social objectives misguides the programming, making the campaign less effective in combating the issue.



General sweeping statements about social good within a campaign are likely to get conscious approval, but it is far less likely to drive real action.¹⁵



4. Lack of Consistency

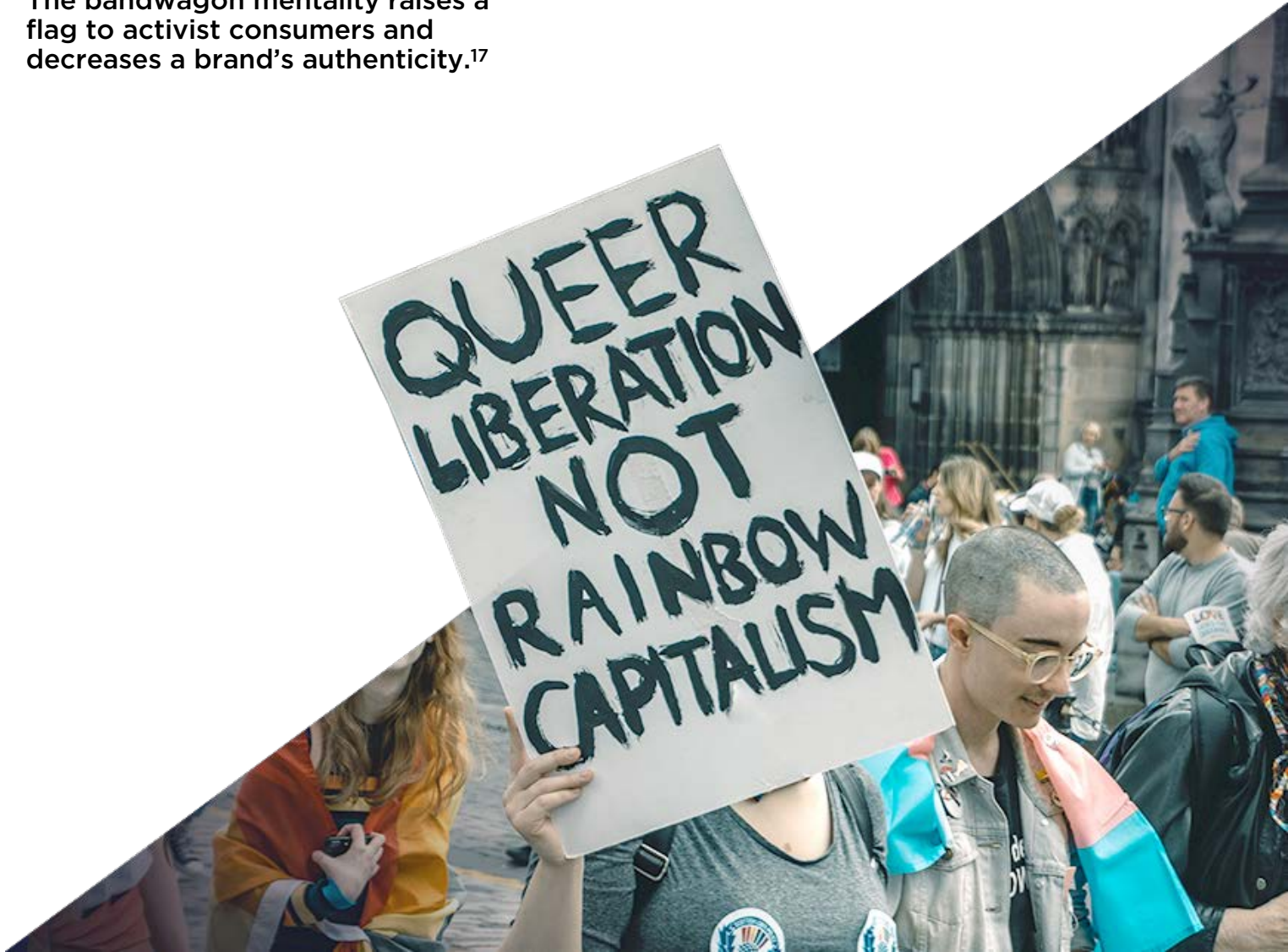
The fourth problem facing brands is insufficient institutional commitment to the issue.

Brands often identify opportunities that are trending, but fail to continue their impact after the conversation has died down. In June 2020, 51% of corporate and employee donations were being made to social justice and racial equity organizations in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement. By December, that number had plummeted to just 5%.¹⁶

When brands stop communicating their allyship after the conversation decreases, it appears as if they are taking advantage of a movement in order to relate to their audience, rather than to truly impact the issue.



The bandwagon mentality raises a flag to activist consumers and decreases a brand's authenticity.¹⁷





The Key is Building Authentic Brand Citizenship

When brands are guided in the right direction, they can make cultural differences in ways that nonprofits and individuals may lack the resources to achieve.

Brand citizenship can remove the barriers to entry for many participants, making social issues feel tangible and easier to impact.¹⁸

As brands seek to make a difference and consumers demand it, we have created a roadmap to guide your brand to authentic impact.

Business support, if done correctly, is one of the six most important factors in successful social movements.¹⁹





First, Lay The Foundation With CSR

In a post-2020 world, internal initiatives are the foundational step to authenticity.

Implementing CSR practices that reflect the values of your company is a critical component to authentic impact. Initiatives such as nonprofit partnerships, science-driven sustainability goals and diversity and inclusion efforts exemplify the actions of the company to put their words into practice. The activist consumer will often look at corporate commitments to evaluate a company's role in and dedication to an issue.

But in 2021, CSR is not enough. To truly make an impact, your company must take the next step to enact change by determining a unique and actionable social issue that your brand can help solve.

80%

OF GLOBAL CONSUMERS



expect brands to solve social issues,

with the majority believing brands should educate, influence and advocate for change.²⁰

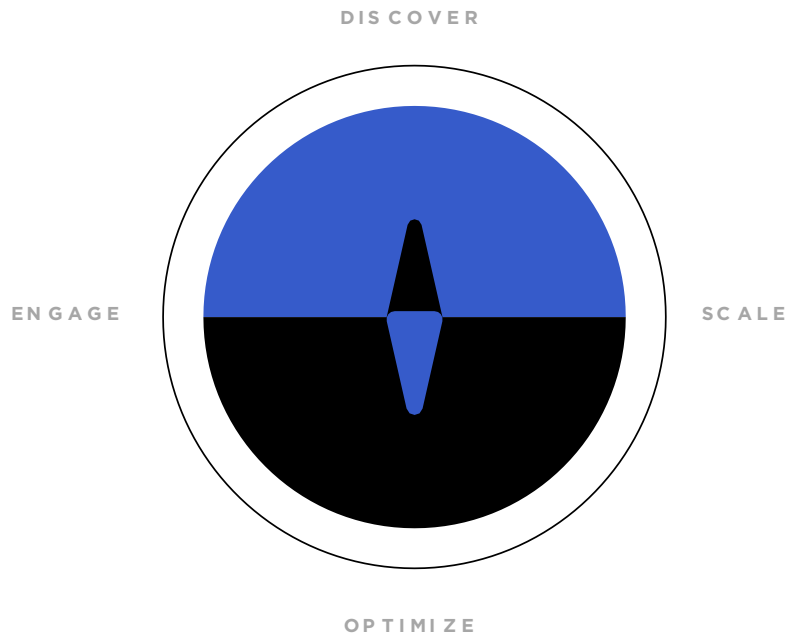
Brand Citizenship

- Brand Differentiator
- Insight-Driven
- Impact at the Individual Level
- Affects Communities
- Education on Issues
- Consumer Participation



Corporate Social Responsibility

- Corporate Table Stakes
- Ethics-Driven
- Impact at the Corporate Level
- Affects Business Practices
- Donations to Causes
- Consumer Awareness



Then, find your compass.

A successful brand citizenship initiative requires identifying an issue that

**draws a connection between your
business role and a human need.**

To do so, determine credibility, then engage your audience in scaling your initiative and optimize your tactics to ensure authentic and sustainable change.



Step One

Discover Your Mission

Paths to Credibility:

- 1** It is your business purpose:
The first reason for getting involved in a cause is because it directly relates to your brand or product purpose.²¹ You recognize that your brand can be a part of the solution because of the services or products you offer or the role that you play within society.

- 2** You have historically participated in the cause:
The second reason to get involved in a cause is because you have a legacy of positively affecting it. Your company has shown its commitment through a long history of CSR initiatives and when your activist audience researches your brand, they will find a clear indication of your leadership within the cause.

- 3** You are transparent about being a part of the problem and then choose to become a part of the solution:
The third and most impactful reason for choosing a cause is recognizing an issue your company has perpetrated. These issues may be connected to your marketing, supply chain management, leadership structures, hiring practices, etc. This type of brand citizenship requires self-awareness, transparency and a commitment to internal change.

Find the Unique Overlap:

After determining credibility, find an overlap between your brand's role and your target audience's interests. This unique space will help you identify an issue to impact. Your issue should be specific and measurable.





Step Two

Engage Your Audience

Engage your audience in creative programs and partnerships that responsibly and measurably change those issues for the better.

Creative messaging and programming break through the cause-marketing clutter, separating your brand from its competitors. Ensure all creative messaging clearly defines your goals and credibility within the issue.

> Creativity is key

> Create actionable, long-term programming

> Be transparent about your goals

> Diversify your communication channels

Adobe Max Spotlight

In 2020, Adobe brought their largest creative conference, Adobe MAX, online and made the event free to everyone.

The brand wanted to advertise the event to all creatives, but at the time, advertising was the last thing the audience cared about. This was in the middle of the COVID-related economic fallout and the creative community was hit hard by layoffs. They didn't want ads, they needed work. Luckily, Adobe had jobs, and CoCreate: MAX was born.

Adobe gave the creative community — specifically lesser known and underrepresented creatives — paid opportunities to work with the brand and used their platform to highlight the creatives' work to receive recognition. The CoCreate: MAX campaign, in return, gave a social purpose to Adobe's brand mission of "Creativity for All" by using their platform to help a community in need.



Step Three

Scale Your Impact

Invite your audience and partners to participate and grow your impact. All communications should have a common call to action.

Partnering with nonprofits and cause-adjacent talent will increase your impact and give further credibility to your mission. Creating a common KPI with your partners will ensure all communication streams are working toward the same goal. Collaborate with your partners to define this.

- > Be consistent in your messaging

- > Uplift voices of cause thought-leaders to scale your messaging





Step Four

Optimize Your Programming

Define your business KPIs and your social KPIs.

Evaluate key results and pivot your campaign to maximize impact. Continue your campaign over an extended period, optimizing your messaging as the issue changes to stay relevant and effective.

Create an integrated stewardship team between brand and agency that actively manages your brand's role within the issue. This should be comprised of a leader from PR, CSR, marketing, advertising and a community manager.

> Define quantifiable impact goals using a measurement framework

> Be agile

> Create a stewardship team



Historical Success



Renovated over 31 fields across 18 different states



Provided nearly \$2 million in support



Rethink the Business of Business

Brand citizenship is a part of a larger movement toward corporate social impact.

2020 forced corporations to identify opportunities to work toward a more equitable and just future for our planet and proved that there can be a symbiotic relationship between profit and social good.

Impact Investing

In both the public and private markets, an increasing number of investors are choosing their strategies based on environmental, social and governance guidelines. ESG investing focuses on the intersection of financial gain and sustained positive social and environmental impact. Companies who prioritize these guidelines expand their potential investor pool while also driving their own business forward.²²

Stakeholder Capitalism

In January 2020, the World Economic Forum declared that companies should focus on stakeholder capitalism. Businesses are now being held responsible for their commitment to their employees, their suppliers, their communities and the environment. Companies that have taken this in stride have found success in the marriage of social impact and profit.²³ From an increase in positive sentiment, to employee retention and improved financial performance, social impact has proven to be rewarding for companies.^{24,25}



Of the world's top 100 economies, 69 are nation-sized corporations with the lobbying power to influence and shape policy decisions that affect communities at large.²⁶





In Conclusion

Consumers are demanding that brands impact societal issues authentically and at the community level. Brands who have done this have found financial success and an increase in consumer loyalty.

To participate in active brand citizenship:

1.

Engage Your Peers

Have a conversation with your co-leaders and discuss future goals for your brand. Workshop potential issues your brand is interested in affecting. Determine your current state of corporate social responsibility.

2.

Engage With Us

Have a conversation with us about where you'd like to take your brand. We will work with you to determine an authentic path forward.

3.

Engage Your Consumer

Create work in partnership with us that strategically and creatively engages your consumer in making a quantifiable difference in the world around us.

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