Activism goes mainstream: A look at who’s taking action and why.
What companies need to know about employees, consumers and the activist spark.

Conversations about issues ranging from gun control to climate are louder and more prevalent than ever. They are taking place in people's homes, at school, at work, across social media and in the street. The conversations have become so passionate that we may be reaching a point where brands can no longer afford to remain silent. But when brands do decide to weigh in, it will be the companies who match their words with actions that will be viewed as winners.

Just as people are becoming more vocal, they are also becoming increasingly intolerant and impatient when it comes to brands taking actions that feel contrived or out of touch. In this new era of energized consumers, the companies advocating for issues that align to their brand will benefit, and the leaders who take the long view and recognize the success of their company is tied to their ability to grow responsibly, will be the ones who see true growth.
Asking the right questions.

“How do I know if a stand my company takes will cause a negative reaction?”

“How do we decide when to weigh in on an issue?”

“How do we make sure we don’t offend employees who may not agree with the stand we are taking?”

These are some of the questions we are asked by organizations of all sizes, all the time. And while it’s increasingly difficult to predict public reaction, there are ways companies can better understand how vocal they can and should be, what issues make the most sense for them to address and ways to safeguard their brand when, or if, they do decide to step up and step out.

This study is the first of a series that looks at who is acting, what actions they are taking and why, and how companies may or may not be impacted. The feedback of almost 9,000 people revealed four main findings:

1. **Activism is mainstream.**
   It is coming from more Americans, frequently and across all age groups. A third of all actions are directed at companies.

2. **Most Americans don’t believe companies will deliver on their promises.**
   More than half of those surveyed said they did not believe companies will act in the best interest of all Americans.

3. **Three out of four Americans would forgive a company for taking a stand.**
   However, there are conditions in terms of transparency around the actions being made. In addition, the CEO can play a critical role in mitigating negative reactions.

4. **Drivers of action.**
   Companies influence people to take an action in support of a social stand over friends and family.
Activism is mainstream.

More than half of all Americans took an action in support of a societal issue.

More people took an action (53 percent) than didn’t (47 percent). The study also found that nearly 68 percent of people who have acted have done so multiple times over the past six months.

An NPR study found that people of all ages support gun control, but the issue of climate change has been less clear when it comes to generational support.¹

Age is a factor in activism.

While most might assume this activism would be driven by younger generations, the study found that those within the Gen X and Boomer generations were more likely to report taking an action on a social issue.

An NPR study found that people of all ages support gun control, but the issue of climate change has been less clear when it comes to generational support.¹

¹ Reference: [NPR study on generational support for climate change activism]
Activism is mainstream.

Activism comes in all forms. The actions people are taking vary from more traditional forms such as donating to a cause or signing a petition, to more aggressive actions like participating in an organized protest, considering leaving a job or going as far as leaving a job because they don’t agree with the positions on social issues their company is taking.

One third of all actions were directed at a company.

Of the actions, half were in support of a company, such as purchasing a product or sharing information about the company they work for because they were proud of the social stand. However, nearly the same number of people took an action against a company, such as quitting or considering quitting a company because of the social stand the company had taken.
Unilever is an established example of a house of socially conscious brands that’s growing rapidly (46 percent faster than the rest of the business and 70 percent of its turnover growth) because they are tapping into the values of their consumers.²

When Uber filed its IPO, the significant financial hit #deleteuber had on the company when its CEO didn’t react fast enough to the 2017 ban on immigrants was abundantly clear.³

#grabyourwallet, a campaign started in 2016 that asks shoppers to boycott businesses with ties to the current U.S. Administration, continues to strengthen. Early on, Nordstrom was forced to change some of its vendor relationships.⁴

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**In a supplemental survey:**

The two issues that would push consumers to take an action against a company were child labor and if they learned the company was falsely marketing a sustainability or social initiative.

- 67% Would take action against child labor
- 61% Would take action against false marketing

Employees care more about discriminatory employment practices and poor treatment of employees than if the company was using false marketing practices to position a sustainability or social initiative and/or if they were promoting them to mask negative issues.

- 66% Would take action against unfair labor practices
- 54% Would take action against false marketing

Only one in four would take an action against a company if they did not like or agree with their company’s CEO.

- 25% Would take action if they disapproved of the CEO
Most Americans don’t believe companies will deliver on their promises.

Don’t Believe 53%
Believe 47%

MORE THAN HALF
do not believe
companies will act in
the best interest of
all Americans

The study specifically asked about the Business Roundtable announcement and the 180 companies that signed a pledge stating, “the purpose of a company is to promote an economy that serves all Americans.” 53 percent of those surveyed said they did not believe companies will act in the best interest of all Americans.

Some companies are taking action and changing perception.

Demonstrating action is a strong lever in convincing people that your business is committed to making a positive impact on society. Recent corporate actions such as J.P. Morgan Chase’s support of hiring reformed criminals, Apple’s commitment to addressing homelessness in California and Salesforce’s state-led push to close the gender pay gap in California are three tangible way companies are making a difference.

The Business Roundtable’s updated view of the role of companies in driving social issues had as many supporters as detractors when it was announced. Many hailed it as a very necessary step forward. It serves as acknowledgement of the companies who have already embraced the notion that financial success and positive societal impact can work together.5

Harvard Business Review, however, pointed out a potentially fatal flaw in the pledge when it highlighted that the role of corporate governance was ignored and that for companies to be truly accountable, it needs to be part of the governance structure.
Three out of four Americans would forgive a company for taking a stand.

Majority of Americans would be willing to forgive a brand whose actions went against their personal beliefs, if the company explained the importance of the issue, if there was a clear connection to the brand’s products or services or if it was part of the brand’s heritage and not just a marketing tactic.

73% would forgive a company that took stand on a social cause/issue provided that:

- 33% If company explained why it was important
- 23% If there was a clear connection to the product or service
- 11% If it was clearly connected to their history and NOT marketing
- 6% If employees were clearly behind it
- 18% Would not forgive
- 9% Would only forgive if company changed stance
- 51% Would forgive a company

More specifically, in a supplemental survey, 51 percent said they would forgive a company if they took a stand on a societal issue that was against their personal beliefs if the CEO explained why the company took that stand.

Conversely, 35 percent would forgive a company if they heard the explanation from their own social circle, a third party (37 percent) or an ad (38 percent).
We asked 500 people in this study to name a company they most admired because of the social stand they take on issues.

Most people are aware of the controversy over Nike’s 2018 ad with Colin Kaepernick. This worked for Nike because it was aligned with its brand and was authentic. The company knew it would alienate some consumers. Later in the year track star Allyson Felix left Nike over its pregnancy policy, forcing the company to look deeper into its structure and policies and make changes to ensure they were truly living their brand.

Five years ago, Chick-fil-A CEO Dan Cathy said he was opposed to same-sex marriage. This spurred a series of boycotts and negative publicity. While sales were not impacted (mainly due to a push by former Governor of Arkansas Mike Huckabee’s counter-boycott launched in support of the restaurant) its reputation among LGBTQ was damaged. Fast forward to today, the company is the most profitable chain in the US, it gets high ratings for its community engagement, and it’s heralded for its treatment of employees. Chick-fil-A says, “it invests more than other companies in training its employees and helping them advance their careers — regardless of whether those careers are in fast food.” However, the pressure must have made an impact because recently, Chick-fil-A decided to shift its philanthropic giving away from charities that promote discrimination.
Drivers of action.

Top five issues people care about:

We asked people to cite the issues they cared about most, with the top five in ranked order being animal health and welfare, environment and climate issues, gun control, those related to children (children’s health, education, safety, etc.) and women’s issues.

News stories and social media were the strongest drivers of action. Yet, people were more likely to be inspired to act in support of a societal cause based on the involvement of their company (23 percent) over influence from family and friends (18 percent).
### What you need to know.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context is critical.</th>
<th>If you are considering taking a stand on a societal issue, clearly explain why the company is taking this stand and its connection to the company’s history and heritage.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People have no problem calling you out.</td>
<td>Make sure the stand you take is aligned with your business and brand.</td>
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<td>External communications should be last.</td>
<td>Make sure your employees are on board and engaged first before engaging with external stakeholders.</td>
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<td>CEO can diffuse the spark.</td>
<td>Critical announcements are best delivered personally because there is more trust when news comes directly from the top.</td>
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<td>Companies have more influence than family and friends.</td>
<td>Know your customer/consumer and test messaging/position to gauge ahead before going live. Be willing to accept that you’ll have supporters and detractors for any stand you take.</td>
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<td>Social media and news articles are the biggest influencer.</td>
<td>Provide a narrative that others can share for you that best conveys your story.</td>
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**Methodology:** From October 2–7, 2019, Ruder Finn conducted a 10-question survey administered to 8,933 people (18+) online across the U.S. A supplemental follow-up survey of three questions was given to 500 of the initial survey participants on November 21, 2019. The margin of error for this study is +/- 5 percentage points.
References


4. https://grabyourwallet.org/


