

Be the Brand That Takes a Stand: A Book of Short Stories on Those That Did

The five most eye-catching marketing campaigns that reached down and grabbed your heart – or tried to – in recent times

Overview

Ever wonder why Nike ads get you all pumped up and ready to “just do it?” There’s something about them. They make your arm hairs stand on end, they make you feel alive, they inspire you to stand for what you believe in – to do what you crave for right in the depths of your soul. Just like that. Just do it.

There’s that. Then there’s this other little thing. The brand actually takes a stand. And how. Like its motto – it just takes a stand and sticks to it. Like when it stuck to its guns during the Colin Kaepernick controversy. If THAT isn’t PR, we don’t know what is.

The thing is, we’ve come a long way from when “Stay out of it,” “Avoid controversial issues,” “Don’t ruffle too many feathers,” and “Never invite scandal” were the mantras of social success. In today’s times, when unabashed individuality is at its peak and people look down on those who don’t stand up for something, consumers are turning to brands to lead the charge in affecting change. They have more faith in brands than in governments to do the right thing...to help solve social and political problems.

A 2018 Edelman Earned Brand study titled “Brands Take a Stand” reveals that 64% of consumers across the globe are now “belief-driven buyers.” These buyers avoid, boycott, or even switch brands that differ with them on political and social issues that are close to their hearts.

The study also shows that belief-driven buyers now comprise a majority in every market surveyed – across all age groups, genders, ethnicities, and income levels. Nearly as many consumers aged 35–54 years buy on belief as those aged 18–34 years.



A woman with long, wavy blonde hair is seen from the side, looking down at a display of high-heeled shoes. She is wearing a white long-sleeved top and a black watch on her left wrist. The background is a warm, orange-toned overlay with faint silhouettes of shoes.

What Does the Brand Stand to Gain?

As it turns out, a lot. When a brand takes a stand, it communicates to the world what its beliefs and ideologies are. And given the belief-driven mindset rampant among consumers these days, this immediately drives up purchase intent.

Showcasing a brand's values inspires purchase just as much as showcasing its products or services does. In other words, buyers are equally driven to express an intent to purchase post communication on a brand's stand as they are after having received product-focused communication.

And there's a bonus, too. Communication regarding a brand's stand has a much higher impact – it inspires consumer advocacy much more effectively than communication focused on product features does. A related and highly effective tactic therefore is to again remind consumers of your stand on important issues at the point of sale.

How Much is Too Much?

As a brand, you can choose to take a stand on anything – ranging from a clear purpose, to culture, to full-blown political activism. As people are increasingly trusting brands rather than governmental institutions to bring about positive social change, you have the opportunity and obligation to help them be the change that they want to see.

Thus, the brands of today are increasingly becoming “influencers” on pressing issues that directly affect people’s lives – such as women’s empowerment, climate change, refugee immigration, and racial injustice. But that begs an important question: How worthwhile a strategy is it for brands to take a side on a

particularly sensitive issue? How far can they go?

Granted, telling a powerful story is among the most effective ways to connect with customers at a deeper emotional level. However, brands should not embark on what can essentially be called cause marketing lightly. Controversial or provocative issues are dangerous territory, and when you have a point of view on them, you’re potentially entering a minefield. How kindly consumers take to your view can vary vastly among different communities.

So, who got it right, and who bombed it? Let’s take a look at a few recent instances when brands took a stand, and how it turned out for them.



1. Nike

Yes, full circle. Considering we started out talking about the brand, there was no way it wouldn't be one of the examples, was there?

Love it or hate it, there's no denying that the recent Nike-Colin Kaepernick partnership was a hit from the get-go. The sneaker company's decision to hire the former quarterback despite his national anthem controversy in 2016 was nothing but a beautifully calculated one – perfectly aligned with its values, its image, and every single one of its passionately created previous adverts.

"Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything," said the brand's 30th-anniversary "Just Do It" ad campaign. And the brand followed its own message, to the T. When its ambassador took offense at its Fourth of July special edition Betsy Ross flag-themed shoes, the brand pulled them back. Sure, some customers – and employees too – took offense at the decision. But you know what? The brand's stand on racism and police brutality was clear, public, and consistent with its age-old values.





So yes, even though the campaign was massively controversial and prompted several customers to upload videos of themselves burning Nike merchandise on social media with the hashtag #JustBurnIt, what strikes you is the confidence with which the brand launched an ad that it knew would resonate with as well as rile huge factions of its fan base.

And while it had to deal with backlash by way of boycotts and scathing images of public destruction of its merchandise on social platforms, its shares surged by 36%, resulting in a \$6 billion addition to its market value since signing up Kaepernick.

And the boldness paid off, in spades. The brand remains a clear winner in athletic apparel and accessories, its stock performance has skyrocketed, and its muse, Kaepernick, is estimated to earn millions a year – not too poor for a quarterback who's no longer doing pro.

Typically, race, the national flag, and political protests make for exactly the kind of potent combination that brands have traditionally avoided like the plague. But Nike, though technically age-agnostic in its appeal, also has a target audience that's dominated by passionate, bold, and outspoken youth – a section that has different expectations, prefers companies that have a message, and are willing to get involved in social issues. This audience was just ripe for a campaign that stood for a social issue.



Colin Kaepernick Nike Commercial FULL VIDEO

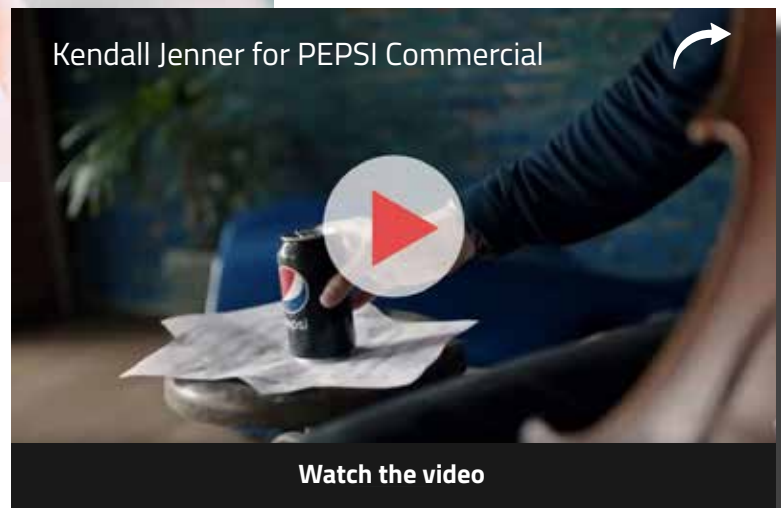


2. Pepsi

For many, the cringe-worthy, Kardashian/Jenner-starring ad is something they work hard to pretend never happened. After all, not many could believe it possible even when they saw it for real. For the uninitiated, here's a lowdown of what went down. Back in 2017, Pepsi faced a lot of heat for its Kendall Jenner-featured ad. The gist of the ad was that people should all unite, and "join the conversation." While the choice of ambassador for the context warranted a whole discussion of its own, what was funnier (or sadder) was the whole approach to the subject.

In the just over 2.5-minute-long "short film," Jenner takes off a wig and leaves a photoshoot to join a protest. After a few customary knowing nods and fist bumps with fellow protesters, the reality-star-turned-supermodel gets everyone together by, *drumroll*, holding out a can of Pepsi to a policeman. Phew! Who would've thought it? If only someone had brought along a cola to all those marches, protests, and demonstrations calling for change!

Sadly (yet unsurprisingly), the internet didn't take too kindly to the suggestion. Within 48 hours, the ad had garnered nearly 1.6 million YouTube views, and Twitter and Facebook were reeling with messages about just how tasteless the whole idea was. Calling it



"trash," activist DeRay Mckesson said: "If I had carried Pepsi I guess I never would've gotten arrested. Who knew?" Ouch. Many people pointed out how using protest imagery to sell soda was downright offensive.

Ironically, this was one of the very few times that the internet actually unanimously agreed on anything – a happening that's a miracle all on its own. Online conversations, which bring out the best as well as the worst in everyone, are notoriously hard to control in the best of situations. But this ad, with its cool, politically aware millennials and "privileged white, peace-soda-offering" protagonist, brought the entire online community together in outrage.

A search for "Pepsi" on Twitter shows that literally no one came to the brand's defense. Not even the brand itself could defend it for long – it pulled the ad less than 24 hours since its release. "Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding. Clearly, we missed the mark and apologize," Pepsi said in a statement following the brutal backlash. "We did not intend to make light of any serious issue."

3. Iceland Foods

Iceland Foods made headlines in August 2018 when it revealed its plans to remove palm oil from its own line of branded products by the end of the year. In line with the decision, the brand released a cartoon-based ad, which begins with a little girl's nursery rhyme-like narration about a naughty orangutan that is wreaking havoc in her bedroom. Fed up of the mischievous animal's antics, the girl banishes it from her room, and the sad orangutan bleakly recounts how deforestation had robbed her of her family and habitat, leaving her with nowhere to live. In a poignant ending, the girl promises the orangutan her help for a better future, and Iceland Foods offers a promise to eliminate palm oil from all its products.

The ad couldn't have been released at a better time, when concerns about the planet and climate change are at an all-time high – especially following a UN report that warns of the irreversible damages of global warming. Thus, the global demand for palm oil, a versatile oil used extensively in food and cosmetic products, is a major cause for environmental concerns. Palm oil production is highly unsustainable, and causes rampant habitat loss and the

endangerment of several species, including orangutans, rhinos, elephants, and tigers.

However, one month into the retailer's Christmas advert release depicting the catastrophic damage palm oil production causes to the natural world, it was deemed "too political" for TV airing. The reason? The film was created by Greenpeace, an environmental advocacy outfit that's identified as a "political" organization – and political advertising is not permitted on British television.



Yet, the "banned" Christmas ad became one of the most popular ads ever, and has racked up over 30 million views on social media with its emotional plea for customers to stop using palm oil-based products. The short film, which has already gone viral on social media thanks to activists, also attracted celebrity attention. Talk show host James Corden's tweet, "This commercial was banned from TV for being too

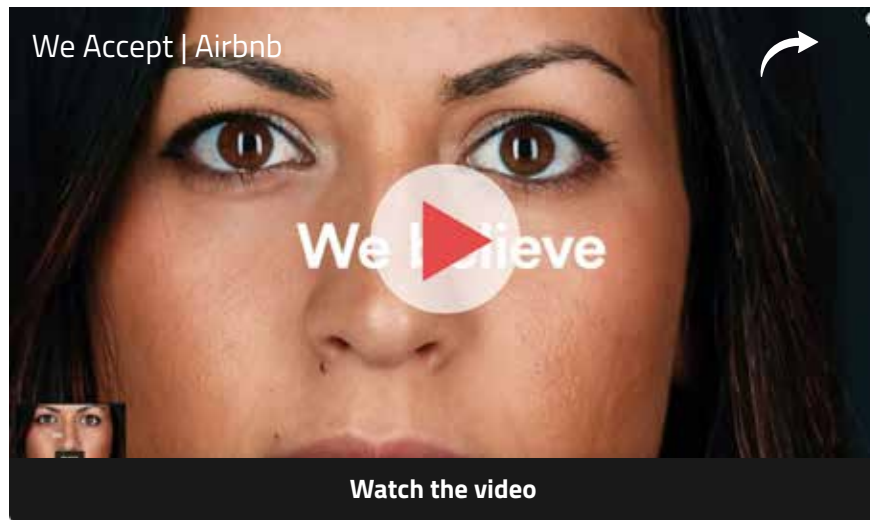


political. I think everyone should see it x," was shared over 300,000 times.

Clearcast, the body that approves television advertisements and ensures their compliance with the required laws, called the word "ban" an emotive word that triggered the viral sharing of the ad. What they don't seem to realize is that neither the topic nor the appeal was political – so who exactly did they think would get offended by it? The move attracted extensive criticism for doing nothing to protect viewers from scheming political messages, and instead preventing a crucial message from being communicated to millions of viewers – many of whom buy palm oil-based products without any awareness about the environmental devastation its production causes, extinction of species and global warming being just a few.

Whatever the controversy surrounding the ad and its broadcasting, Iceland Foods's message spread far and wide – it garnered international attention, and racked up millions of views, posts, and shares on social networks. So what if its little primate-starring ad sparked as much discussion on deforestation and global warming as on "political" advertising and censorship? The brand didn't give in or back down, and continues to demonstrate support for its cause.

4. Airbnb



Just nine days following US President Trump's signed order to temporarily seal American borders to refugees, popular online marketplace for home-lodging and sharing Airbnb directly responded to the decision through an ad – aired during the prime-time Super Bowl spot, no less.

The ad, titled "We Accept," displayed an ensemble of people of different nationalities, along with the bold declaration: "We believe no matter who you are, where you're

from, who you love or who you worship, we all belong. The world is more beautiful the more you accept." The message was followed by the hashtag #weaccept. The brand received nationwide attention with its politically-charged, prime-time-aired TV commercial in response to Trump's polarizing travel ban.

Besides being one of the most discussed – and praised – Super Bowl ads, it showcased and enhanced Airbnb's wider stance on

the sensitive issues of race and diversity. While the brand has itself received flak in the past for supposed racial discrimination taking place on its platform, the new ad served as reassurance that Airbnb follows a no-nonsense policy on the issue, while also making its own political stance crystal clear.

Reinforcing the message of its bold ad, Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky issued a statement a few days following the airing of the commercial, expressing the company's goal "to provide short-term housing over the next five years for 100,000 people in need." The brand also vowed to contribute \$4 million to the International Rescue Committee to help globally displaced populations.

Why did the campaign work so well? Because not only was this a stance on an emotional issue that many people feel strongly about, it was an issue that directly aligned with the brand's service offering. It was the perfect positioning for the brand. What's more, Airbnb didn't stop at adopting a controversial standing. It backed up its standing with a promise of real action that would work directly to ease the damaging impact of the Presidential ban. Finally, there's personal accountability – the company's own CEO was the face for its public announcements. Not a PR representative, or a generic company executive. People like CEOs who speak up. Brian Chesky did that in style.





5. MGM Resorts



In April 2018, MGM Resorts released "Universal Love – Wedding Songs Reimagined," an album of wedding songs for same-sex couples. Executed in collaboration with world-class musical talents such as Bob Dylan, Kesha, and Valerie June, the global entertainment and hospitality brand's bold campaign in celebration of LGBTQ love was timed perfectly to resonate with increasing tolerance toward same-sex marriage.

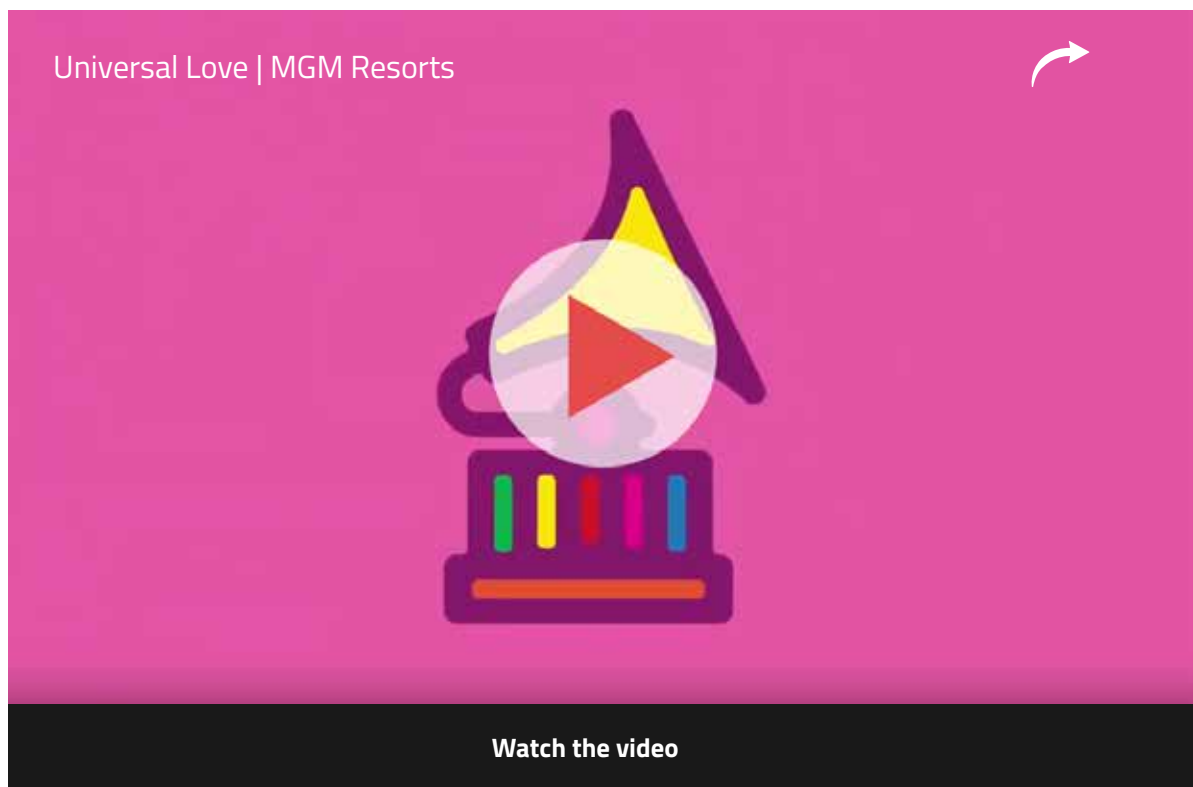
The six-song recording, which re-imagined famous, customarily heterosexual wedding songs in same-sex settings, has same-sex voice pairings and flipped "he" and "she" pronouns. For instance, Bob Dylan transformed the iconic "She's Funny That Way" into "He's Funny That Way." St. Vincent for his part spun "Then He Kissed Me" into "Then She Kissed Me," complete with a grungy electro pulse. Janis Joplin's 1968 hit "I Need a Man to Love" became Kesha's "I Need a Woman to Love," featuring a video with real footage from a ceremony that the singer herself solemnized. An original track contributed by Indie duo She & Him was released in two versions – one each for heterosexual and same-sex couples.



The album, which was released across all major streaming channels, had an immediate and massive impact on culture from an inclusiveness perspective. It sparked discussions on how music, and entertainment as a whole, can be more inclusive. The campaign received widespread coverage – it racked up 2.5 billion media impressions and over 440,000 streams within the first month, besides ending up in the ninth spot in the iTunes pop category (fleetingly toppling Queen Bey's "Lemonade").

What made this campaign so wildly successful? For one, it was a culmination of the brand's two-decade-long advocacy

for the LGBTQ community. In other words, the brand didn't jump the cause. Back in 2004, it was the first brand in the gaming and hospitality industry to offer same-sex health benefits to its staff. Same-sex commitment ceremonies were also performed at MGM Resorts property chapels over 10 years before same-sex marriage was legalized. Second, pivoting classic songs to highlight cultural changes such as increased public acceptance and protection of LGBTQ rights, the campaign draws on deep historical references to underline the importance of these shifts. If that doesn't ram home the point, we don't know what will.





Today's world is cynical. Be careful where you step.

A word of caution – according to Google, cause marketing, given its unprecedented popularity and consequent abuse, is already turning people cynical. While this should be a concern for the marketing community (particularly given the fact that cause-centric ads on YouTube quadrupled among the top 100 brands during 2012–2017), it's nowhere near alarming. The bottom line is this – all consumers want is authenticity.

What's more, Edelman's 2019 Trust Barometer indicates that globally, consumer trust in businesses has inched up by 3% since 2016, and that in fact, consumers seem to be placing more responsibility in brands to bring about change. The barometer also found that 73% of people agree that organizations can take definite action to increase profits as well as improve socio-economic conditions wherever they operate. So, while it's true that consumers are becoming smarter at identifying the brands that support the right cause, the real takeaway for brands is that they should not merely promote an important cause, but actually do good – whether by partnering with non-profits, or ramping up their CSR strategies.



Weigh in the pros and the cons

As millennials are increasingly looking for positive change, their attention is turning to brands that mirror this outlook and work toward affecting actual change – research shows that a majority of consumers believe that brands should do more than just offer products/ services.

But no matter what, remember this – never give in to peer pressure. Taking up a cause isn't something that can be followed like a trend. It has to be well thought through, verified for brand relevance, and followed up with several other supportive actions besides the campaign itself.

Above all, do not embark on this strategy lightly, or with the aim of achieving quick results. Taking a stand on a volatile issue is the equivalent of stepping into dangerously slippery territory – and how well consumers take to your stance, while

prone to vast variations across different audience profiles, could be the whole difference between whether you become the next cool dude everyone wants to hang with, or the socially awkward teenager.

For sure, cause marketing is a risky strategy. No one wants to pull a Kendall Jenner-Pepsi fiasco if they can help it. But then again, with a majority of consumers willing to boycott brands that don't share their social beliefs, it's a risk nearly any brand worth its salt is willing to take.

Never before have brands had as much power as they do now over affecting social change. And no matter how uncomfortable it makes them, brands will soon have no choice but to step into the fray and be heard above the rest – in a clear, resounding, authentic voice that's difficult to ignore.



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