Political Issues: Should Brands Get Involved To Build A Long-Term Customer Rapport?

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With the average consumer exposed to countless adverts per day and consumers becoming less brand loyal, many consumer goods companies look for different ways to build a long term rapport with consumers and involvement in political issues is a growing trend among some. Ben & Jerryâ€™s for example has used its brand to raise awareness of environmental issues, such as damage to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, while numerous brands that sponsored the Sochi Winter Olympics took a stance against the domestic policies of the Russian government by making their advertising pro-gay rights. While there is potential for some consumers to be alienated and harm brand sales, the benefits of a strong brand identity can outweigh the negatives.

Ben & Jerryâ€™s and the Barrier Reef

Unilever-owned ice cream brand Ben & Jerryâ€™s incurred the wrath of the Australian government by using its products to raise consumer awareness of the Save the Reef campaign run by the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) in Spring 2014. It withdrew its Phish Food ice cream flavour to highlight damage to the reef done by dredging in the area. The Australian government urged its citizens to boycott Ben & Jerryâ€™s as it said the campaign was untrue and had harmed the Australian economy. Yet a survey conducted by the Brisbane Times indicated that 81.0% of respondents said they would be more inclined to purchase Ben & Jerryâ€™s because of its campaign.

Chick-fil-A and Barilla Anti-Gay Marriage Stance

Both Chick-fil-A and Barilla are examples of brand involvement in politics backfiring somewhat. The CEO of American fast food chain Chick-fil-A took an openly anti stance to gay marriage in July 2012, while the chairman of Barilla said in summer 2013 that its advertising would never feature gay couples. It also emerged that Chick-fil-Aâ€™s associated charity, WinShape Foundation, had heavily donated to political organisations that opposed LGBT rights. Following widespread calls from LGBT groups for consumers to boycott its restaurants, Chick-fil-A issued a statement shortly thereafter stating that "Going forward, our intent is to leave the policy debate over same-sex marriage to the government and political arena." Barilla also came under fire from LGBT groups not just in its domestic market, Italy, but also in the key USA market, where it held the majority company share in dried pasta in 2013. This led to a retraction by the chairman of his original statement.

Conclusion: Pick your Alignment with Political Issues Carefully

The answer to the question of brand involvement in political therefore has to be that it is a good idea only when a brand can be sure that the stance it adopts is likely to endear consumers to, rather than alienateÂ then from its brand. Given the strong support among generation Y and Z consumers for same sex marriage, and the fact that this is also the prime target group for fast food chains, Chick-fil-Aâ€™s strong opposition to this seems particularly unwise. Likewise, Barillaâ€™s stance generated a wealth of negative publicity which its image is struggling to recover from.

Many other brands, such as Starbucks, Budweiser, Microsoft and Apple have come out in favour of gay marriage and gay rights, recognising that to do so marks them out as progressive and in touch with popular opinion. Their hope is that this will also translate to a perception that their products are innovative and cutting edge.

The Ben & Jerryâ€™s campaign was successful primarily because the destruction of the Barrier Reef is not a socially divisive issue. Brands must be extremely careful when aligning with a particular political issue because the damage is done as soon as affiliation is made with a particular political issue, regardless of subsequent retractions. Nonetheless, done correctly, it can strengthen brand identity and consumer loyalty.

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