Gartner Research

Guide to Addressing Cultural Tension Through Brand Activism and Social Cause Marketing

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Initiatives:Marketing Leadership and Strategy

Brands must evaluate when, how and whether to address the rapidly escalating racial tensions in American cities amid a pandemic. Gartner's consumer sentiment research, along with its study of contentious-subject messaging, prepares CMOs to make the best possible decisions.
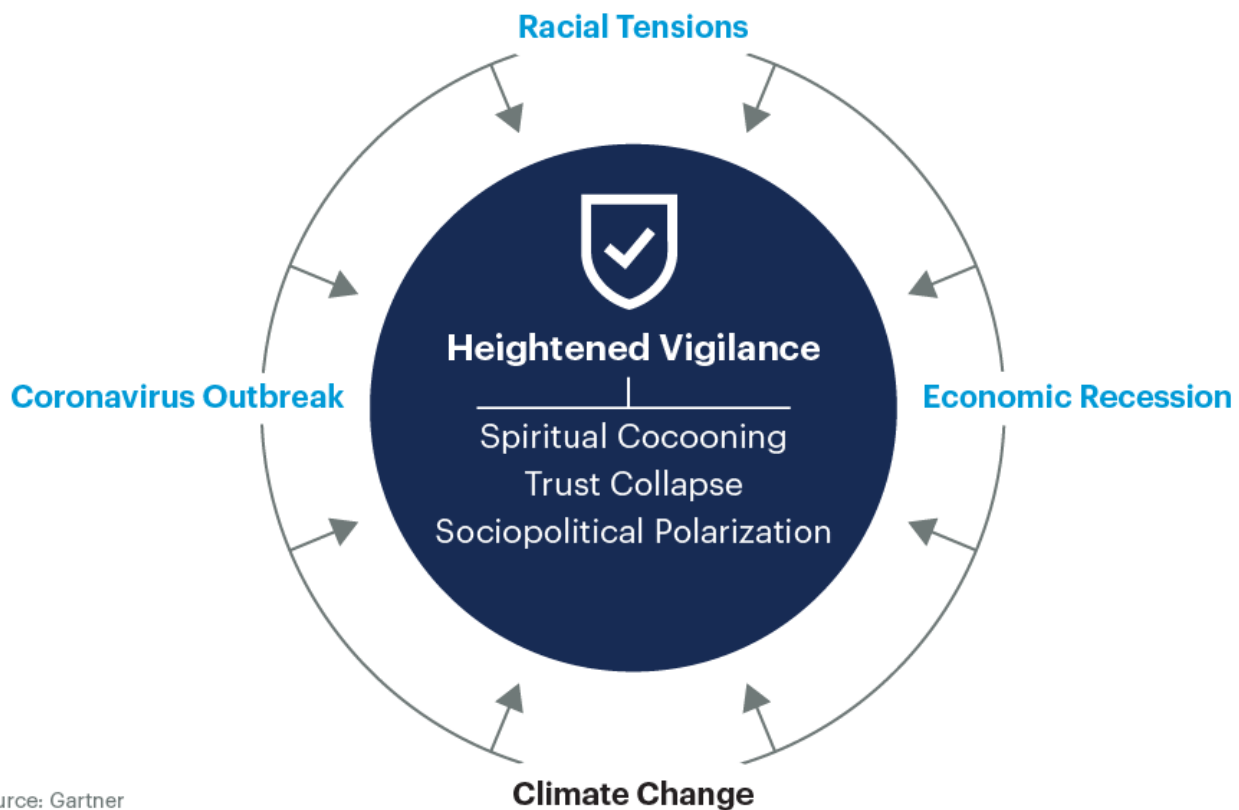
Analysis

Marketers want the brands they operate to meet each complex cultural moment with an appropriate degree of sensitivity, gravity and self-awareness. In order to know what appropriate means for each brand, marketers must look to consumer expectations and translate those insights into actionable opportunities for various modes of marketing and communications. In 2020, marketers have been tasked with a relentless cycle of reassessments due to a global pandemic. Already in a fragile and uncertain place, they must now pause, yet again, to take the measure of brand values, positioning and messaging. Then they must determine whether those brand pillars are adequate and fitting for a racially charged period of civil unrest amid a global pandemic (see Figure 1).

Brands come to this moment with varying levels of cause marketing maturity, an array of corporate social responsibility efforts and widely ranging values — some purpose-driven, some not. Regardless of where a brand stands, marketers ought to consider that this unprecedented cultural moment is the result of long-simmering tensions and polarization within the American populace. The pandemic exacerbates these existing wounds.

Figure 1. Marketing Leaders Must Closely Monitor the Deepening of Socioeconomic and Cultural Fault Lines

Sociopolitical and Cultural Zeitgeist: May-June 2020

Racial Tensions

Coronavirus Outbreak

Economic Recession

Heightened Vigilance

Spiritual Cocooning
Trust Collapse
Sociopolitical Polarization

Climate Change

Source: Gartner
ID: 728004

55% of consumers say the ongoing pandemic has caused American society to become more divided, according to the Gartner Consumer Pandemic Attitudes and Behaviors Survey (May 2020).

Marketing leaders seeking to understand and act on the longitudinal Gartner consumer research that traces the buildup to this moment can find the most relevant portions of that work below. Marketing leaders can also find recommendations for applying those insights to their brand's overall strategy and positioning, as well as to specific roles within their organization (communications, customer acquisition and loyalty, and digital marketing channel strategy).

Research Highlights

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Use Consumer and Culture Insights to Ground Brand Actions in Context

"The Dramatic Collapse of Consumer Trust Is Bad for Brands and Challenging for Marketing Leaders"

Ambient trust — the extent to which consumers feel they live in a society where the institutions and entities they rely on to keep that society together are competent and reliable — has fallen across the board for U.S. consumers. Nationwide protests and demonstrations in the wake of George Floyd's death and surrounding consumer sentiment [1] are yet another symptom of the trust collapse. This dramatic decline should give marketing leaders pause. Even if their own brands enjoy high consumer trust, marketing leaders operate in a context where consumers doubt that their government, big brands and even their fellow Americans are competent and reliable. Marketing leaders must make rebuilding *societal trust* a key initiative and work to boost general trust via internal and external methods.

"Consumer Insight: The Politicized Third Place"

Consumers have long felt that personal beliefs about race, gender and ideology can be a source of conflict with others. While these tensions and surrounding polarization aren't new, in 2018 we observed the shifted locus of these tensions toward public, brand-owned spaces. Brands, especially those who operate premises, can't stay on the sidelines: Public spaces and businesses are front lines and are likely to experience the collateral damage of society's divide. This politicization of "third places," [2] sociologist Ray Oldenburg's term for the places where people spend time between home and work ("first" and "second" places, respectively), is ultimately a marketer challenge. Citizen policing grabs headlines, but consumers prefer authority figures, not other consumers, to do that work. In branded territory, employees are those authority figures.

"Early-April 2020 Update: Marketers, Solve for Consumers' Most Urgent COVID-19 Fears"

The COVID-19 pandemic landed in the midst of a U.S. population already grappling with socioeconomic factors that have frayed the seams of trust and sent people chasing after security and safety. As early as mid-March, consumers articulated a fear of pandemic-induced physical violence, including looting or robberies. These fears indeed materialized to some degree as instances of aggressive behavior in response to the pandemic [3] or restrictions imposed to contain the spread of disease. [4] But the scope of these tensions was ultimately eclipsed by the toll of destructive race-related confrontations that began to spread in late-May and early-June. Additionally, emerging concerns about demonstrations — peaceful or otherwise — becoming COVID-19 spreader events [5] adds to the inherent gravity of socially charged conflict amid a pandemic.

"Survey Analysis: Leverage Values to Connect With Your Brand's Multicultural Consumers"

Though societal tensions aren't limited to race-based conflict, multicultural consumers have long harbored fears for their personal safety and that of their friends and family. This concern is mirrored by their growing pessimism about the state of their country. Moreover, black and Latino consumers bear a disproportionately high health and economic burden from the COVID-19 epidemic, [6] which makes them particularly vulnerable in this crisis. Marketing leaders looking to connect with multicultural consumers must acknowledge and empathize with their fears and

concerns and, to the extent possible, identify actions to address those concerns. See the example set by Microsoft in standing up for Dreamers.

Study Best Practices for Marketing on Divisive Subjects

"Use Gartner's Crisis Framework to Plan for COVID-19 Marketing Scenarios"

Scenario planning helps brands weather unforeseen circumstances like these, and brands that use scenario planning should update those plans now. The compounded crises of pandemic-based and racially charged civic unrest foment a period of extreme uncertainty. New information and situations unfold on a day-to-day basis, and will continue to do so for an extended period. The framework in this research anticipates the plausibility of a worst-case scenario plan that accounts for abrupt further disruption to marketing operations, and describes the uncertainty phase as one likely to be marked by consumer frustration. An explosion of consumer frustration did, indeed, occur. And while its specific manifestation as race-related civic unrest and activism wasn't anticipated by many brands, it was expected by many consumers. It's not too late for marketers to reap the preparatory benefits outlined here for demarcating an uncertainty phase in scenario planning.

"Creating Effective Messaging About Contentious Societal Issues"

Timing of brand response on a contentions societal issue is important, especially in a crisis scenario. But consistency with regard to brand values and whether or not a company made a difference on the issue have a significantly stronger impact on internal and external stakeholder responses, according to this research. In the context of the current crisis, this research suggests that brands should exercise caution before speaking out on a topic where the brand has no previous claim.

"Optimizing Your Ad Targeting and Messages for Polarized Times"

Leverage consumers' differentiated key values, attitudes and expectations to build emotionally resonant advertising for each specific side of the massive ideological chasm that separates people. This chasm, or Great Divide, goes beyond mere politics. But to reach a mass audience, lean on the values shared by Liberals and Conservatives. Attitudinal common ground exists for consumers, but it's a slim and noisy strip of land where competition for planting a flag is fierce.

"Best Practices for Navigating Brand Activism in a Polarized Era"

Determine when your brand should join any given cultural conversation by assessing consumer perceptions of contentious issues. For brands looking to minimize risk and prioritize broader appeal, issues should be framed as social, focusing on the human element rather than any mention of legislation or politics. For issues that fall in the gray area between social and political, marketing leaders should use knowledge of their target audience to align with audience perceptions, anticipate response and mitigate risk. But tread carefully: In 2019, 62% of consumers
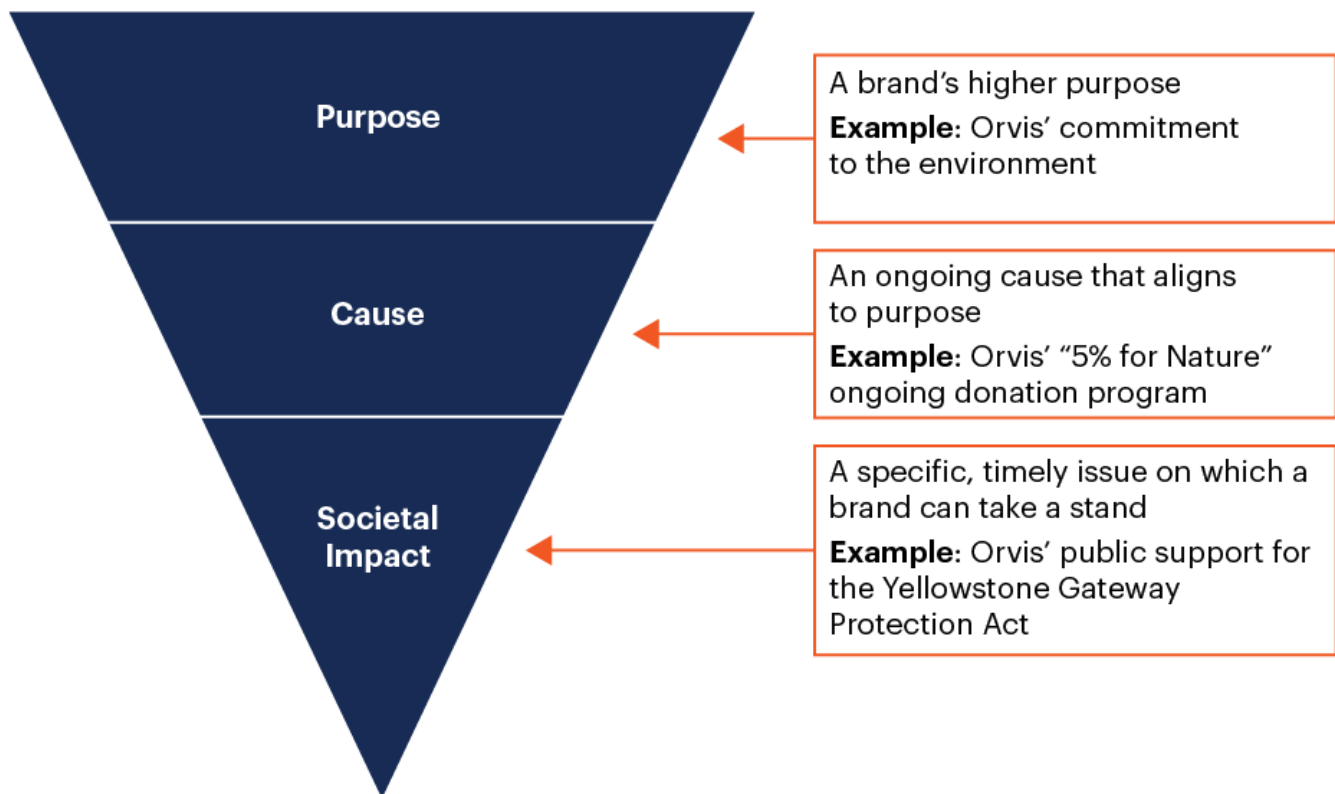
said brands should only take a stand on issues that are consistent with the values of the company. [7]

"Prepare, Monitor and Defend Your Brand in the Era of Fake News"

Based on Gartner client inquiries, marketing leaders are increasingly focused on purpose, cause marketing and societal issues (see Figure 2). Seventy percent of CMOs said connecting their brand proposition to positive societal impact is an important way to engage with consumers over the next two to three years. [8] According to this research, top issues that consumers and employees expect are: climate change, race relations, corporate governance and LGBTQ. Ideally, brands should demonstrate a history of commitment to a cause. But with emerging social issues, they might also turn to their employees to identify and participate in issues important to the organization.

Figure 2. Purpose, Cause and Societal Impact

Purpose, Cause and Societal Impact

Purpose	A brand's higher purpose **Example:** Orvis' commitment to the environment
Cause	An ongoing cause that aligns to purpose **Example:** Orvis' "5% for Nature" ongoing donation program
Societal Impact	A specific, timely issue on which a brand can take a stand **Example:** Orvis' public support for the Yellowstone Gateway Protection Act

Source: Gartner
ID: 728004

"Leveraging Diversity and Inclusion in Your Marketing Strategy"

Consumers expect consistency from brands that feature diversity in marketing. They actively seek brand diversity and inclusion-initiative information online. Younger consumers prefer consistent diversity commitment, and inconsistent brands risk alienating future consumers. This research lays out a maturity model for evaluating a brand's D&I initiatives. It also makes recommendations

for CMOs to bring the voice of the consumer to D&I conversations with other corporate stakeholders and executives with a more traditional part to play in D&I initiatives, such as HR.

Evidence

[1] "George Floyd Death: Unrest Spreads Across U.S." BBC.

[2] R. Oldenburg. "The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community." Marlowe & Company. 1999.

[3] "'We Just Want to Be Safe': Hate Crimes, Harassment of Asian Americans Rise Amid Coronavirus Pandemic." USA Today.

[4] "Who's Enforcing Mask Rules? Often Retail Workers, and They're Getting Hurt." New York Times.

[5] "Health Officials Worry Mass Protests Could Ignite Coronavirus Surge." NPR.

[6] "Financial and Health Impacts of COVID-19 Vary Widely by Race and Ethnicity." Pew Research Center.

[7] Gartner Consumer Polarized World Survey (January 2019)

[8] Dentsu Aegis Network (January 2019)

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Toolkit: Supply Chain Leaders Outsourcing MSA — Article 18 — Use of Subcontractors

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