

OPINION

Where have all the principled marketers gone?

For many years brands have often moved quickly to jump on the bandwagon of purpose driven marketing. But lately the silence is all but deafening, argues TrinityP3's Nathan Hodges.

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by **NATHAN HODGES**



Amidst all the noise, distraction, confusion and nonsense coming out of Trump's America so far this year, there's something missing. There's a deafening silence from marketers.

Where there used to be so much noise around purpose, cause and current issues, now it's the sound of dogs not barking.

And let's leave aside politics – yours and mine (although for the record, I have no problem declaring mine where it's relevant to do so). Since this piece is appearing in a marketing trade publication, let's talk just about marketing. It's why you're here, after all.

Just so very recently, so many brands were falling over themselves to declare 'solidarity' with Black Lives Matter, or to 'stand with' the #MeToo movement, or to 'show support' for Earth Hour. Some brands did this kind of stuff well. Most didn't, of course.

But the point is it was everywhere, all the time, and you couldn't escape it.



To the black community:
We see you.
We stand in solidarity with you.
This can no longer be the status quo.

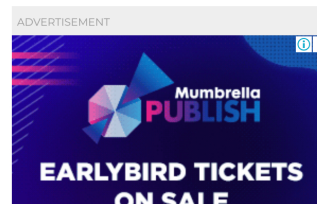
Now, we can debate how cynical all this activity was, and some would argue it wasn't without consequence. Indeed, earlier this month [The Guardian published this opinion piece which questioned whether purpose-driven marketing had actually helped the far right](#) by trivialising activism (and yes, that would be Pepsi and Kendall Jenner).

And obviously, having a "purpose" is not right for every brand – in fact I'd argue we're all still repairing the damage Simon Sinek did to the cause of brand strategy with his blanket exhortation to 'start with why'. I mean, I might reasonably object to driving a car made by Elon Musk, but I'm not going to spend too much time worrying whether my tuba is aligned with my personal values.

But in what I'd at least say was a target-rich public environment for purpose marketing post January 20, there's been almost no comment at all, from any major brand. Hardly a peep. No solidarity, no standing, no support. No brand saying anything clear, controversial, brave or even modest about what is happening.

It's astonishing, and it gets more so as time goes by.

Indeed at TrinityP3 we've heard about marketers and agencies being afraid to post on social media, even about something as widely recognised as R U Ok? Day or International Women's Day, for fear of drawing the ire of their US counterparts. Our recent State of the Pitch research also



highlighted that [marketers were asking their agency partners less often about their DE&I or ESG principles](#).

And it's not like the issues at hand are inconsequential or niche. We're talking about academic freedom, climate, overseas aid, Ukraine, the Middle East, trans rights, deportation without trial, betraying allies, embracing dictators, or whatever else got posted this morning.

So what's happened to make everyone so quiet?

Is it because a bunch of cautious research companies are finding that none of these things play well any longer? And they're saying that holds true, all of a sudden, for every brand? Or is it that we're all so polarised now that nobody wants to risk saying anything about anything?

Or is it that marketers are bravely waiting to see which way the wind is blowing before they decide on their principles?



Nathan Hodges

I reckon it might actually be this: it used to be easy to say your brand stood for something. But now making a stand might actually cost marketing teams, senior executives (read: your CEO) and shareholders something tangible. It might involve actual risk as well as reward.

In other words, your shiny corporate values and lofty principles might actually have an invoice attached this time. And it sucks to be a grown-up.

As Winston Churchill pointed out: "You have enemies? Good. That means you've stood up for something, sometime in your life." LinkedIn used to be full of quotes like this. Now, not so much. It's all part of a subtle, spreading chill of surrender where companies obey in advance, quietly row back on DEI, and remove modest corporate value statements that we all agreed were table stakes just last year.

Perhaps it's quaintly naïve of me to expect business to do more than what they are brilliant at – making money. But from a plain marketing and branding point of view – given the obvious commercial advantage of being distinctive and being first, it's just terribly odd to me that very few, if any, brands have yet moved to become part of the resistance, make a stand and claim the unoccupied territory. It's strategy 101.

To quote the classic BBH advertising campaign for Levis: "When the world zigs, zag."

Whatever the real reasons for hesitation – 2025 still feels like a massive, urgent opportunity for brave, principled marketers to put their brands on the right side of history.

So, where are they?

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Searching for purpose. 29 May 25

The best take I've read on this in a while.

It seems like brand's true intentions have really been revealed in the past few years – and spoiler alert – those cynical consumers were right. There was minimal substance behind their 'purpose' initiatives.

My hope is that this period will clear the air and be a reset that will allow brands with a true sense of purpose and position to re-enter the conversation.

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