

What's the purpose of a purpose-driven brand?

OPINION

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Should your brand become purpose driven? There's a lot more to it than just having good intentions, but that's a good place to start says Stephen Allan...

During my time in this industry, I've seen a dramatic shift towards consumers becoming sceptical or even distrustful of brands. Whether prompted by serial misuse of personal data, faulty products or failed promises, consumers are more than happy to abandon brands over the slightest missteps.

Feeling pressed by growing competition, I believe this has caused many businesses to decide that having a compelling or emotive brand purpose is the way for them to recapture consumer goodwill. And it's worth saying that brands with a strong purpose can potentially help the overall good of society – depending on the cause and message – and also help

customers know what they stand for through purpose-driven brand actions.

Just look at Boots in the UK. It's a brand that has chosen to champion women and inspire them to live well, feel empowered and confident, and its [support](#) of the 2019 Women's World Cup, I believe, was a brilliant example of the company putting its money where its mouth is, using the tournament as a vehicle to make female athletes household names across the country.

But in a world in which consumers can quickly find out if a brand is acting on their promise, it's crucial that brands carefully decide whether becoming purpose driven is relevant for their business and customers.

To be or not to be purpose driven

In my mind, becoming a purpose-driven brand will only succeed if a business has a purpose which it can authentically embrace both internally and externally. Whether that's building an eco-friendly business model or championing a social cause, the changes an organisation needs to make may vary from wide-sweeping changes in the boardroom and beyond, to changing suppliers or remaking products.

These changes must be communicated to stakeholders every step of the way; if your business isn't fully committed to this change, or if that cause doesn't gel with your existing business model, it is far more likely to damage than help a brand. And just because a brand may be passionate about a topic, it doesn't mean that it's something a brand should adopt if it can't deliver real impact or change and do this authentically. We all know where the road paved with good intentions leads.

Failing to authentically embrace any purpose will only harm a brand's reputation, and potentially risk the success of future initiatives. Thoughts of campaigns which have positioned a *product* as the solution to society's issues come to mind when in reality that's just promoting the idea that a consumer is doing good by choosing a certain brand. This is inauthentic and can seriously backfire.

Of course, even when done right, the reception of a brand purpose or mission can be met with mixed results. It's always worth bearing in mind that these initiatives, no matter how beneficial for society, may not be warmly received if consumers feel they are even slightly inauthentic, or the message is muddled by a lack of transparency from the brand.

Despite this, we know there can be considerable benefits for brands that actively take steps to authentically embrace a social cause: a [Harvard study](#) found that businesses making investments in environmental, social, and governance issues exhibit better stock market performance and profitability in the future.

The process of becoming purpose driven

So, when it comes to your brand deciding on whether a purpose-driven approach is right for you – what should you do? I've outlined four steps that I would recommend to every brand when undertaking this process:

- 1. Define what your business stands for:** You need to determine the larger role your brand wants to play in customers' lives. This can be done by understanding what customers feel passionate about when it comes to your brand, why employees choose to work for you and why other businesses partner with you. This way you'll understand what differentiates your brand and where you can make a difference.
- 2. Be clear and authentic:** Consumers can see through inauthenticity with a quick Google search. If your company is truly committed to its purpose, then you must ensure its principles not only guide every business decision, but also communicate this purpose far and wide to stakeholders.
- 3. Use your purpose to engage consumers:** With consumers actively choosing to do business with brands which identify with their beliefs, your purpose can now help you engage an entirely new audience. From product design to future business directions, your purpose can be a secret weapon to identify new growth opportunities and markets, which will support your purpose in the future.

4. Regularly check-in to ensure your purpose resonates: While it's all well and good establishing a brand purpose to address a social issue or need, it's crucial to ensure you check in with marketing teams and consumers to make certain the brand message and purpose is resonating. If not, then it's important to evaluate the current strategy and address any gaps or concerns directly and openly.

Ultimately, I believe that all brands must be committed to their customers' needs and beliefs; the question now is whether this commitment extends to every facet of a business or remains another piece of a bigger picture. Becoming purpose-driven works for many brands but should never be undertaken for its own sake. Only an authentic, robust and well-communicated purpose will benefit a brand. And if your brand truly believes in its cause, but can't show this, then don't try until its ready.

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