

Brands Line Up Toupée The Price For Expressing An Opinion On Trump And His Policies

CONSUMER OPINION RESPONSE

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I reckon I speak for a lot of people when I say that the daily news updates of “what ridiculous thing Trump has said now” are growing tired, quickly. One interesting outcome of the highly charged political times we are living through, is observing how brands are stepping up, being brave and taking a stance. During the last month we’ve witnessed companies expressing their view on the (now frozen) executive order to ban immigrants from several, predominantly Muslim, countries and all refugees from entering the U.S. Although we are witnessing the drama unfolding across the pond from a spectator position, we aren’t immune from the consequences. The immigration ban, along with other polarising sentiments projected by the Trump administration have an influential effect on the UK population. Some companies in the U.S. have found themselves in a very difficult position; global brands with key markets in America amongst those especially affected.

Taking a political stance can be advantageous for a company, and can be used as a way to

position themselves: if the brand's core values align with the values of their audience this is likely to resonate strongly. The immigration ban has pushed some companies who have distinctive and established brand purpose to get involved in the conversation. We've witnessed global giants like Google and Airbnb taking action against the immigration ban (Google by creating a \$4 billion dollar crisis fund, and Airbnb by housing those affected by the ban for free). Both companies brand values are associated with ideas of global freedom and breaking down barriers, so this stance against the ban reiterates what they stand for. We know that consumers expect more from companies than just the product or service they pay for – brand trust and loyalty are based on a set of expectations of how the company operates, so when this is violated, company performance can suffer.

However, this leads to a risky predicament for companies operating in the U.S. right now as most corporations of a decent size will have a diverse audience composed of people supporting both sides of the political spectrum. Regardless of what's right or wrong, the companies in this awkward position risk alienating half of their market who support Trump, or the other half who oppose him. Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz took a bold stance in reaction to the immigration ban, and admirably vowed to hire 10,000 refugees over 5 years. This has proven to have a positive impact on the company's brand health – with Starbucks' reputation score increasing by 5.9 points to a score of -3.1. However, despite their liberal brand values and the obvious appeal of the company's reaction to the ban from many of their consumers, Starbucks have still come under fire from right-wing opposition who disagree with the pledge, and “#boycottstarbucks” has been in full swing. In contrast, Budweiser suffered the opposite reaction; their “Born the Hard Way” Super Bowl advert had been created long before the immigration ban was announced, but suddenly the brand was framed in an accidentally liberal light. Unfortunately for them, these are views that were not favoured by half of their American market, and the backlash has ensued.

Nevertheless, there is another layer to the predicament: is staying quiet and not stepping into the political spotlight any less damaging? Uber stayed silent and continued working at surge prices when other taxis went on strike over the ban that saw immigrants trapped in the airport, and have since suffered from the Uber boycott “#deleteuber” from some of their disappointed and frustrated customers. Uber's situation was made worse as their

competitor Lyft played the situation to their advantage, and donated \$1 million to the American Civil Liberties Union. It seems to me that there is certainly not an easy answer, especially for brands with broad appeals across the U.S. market. It would appear that powerful American brands are being forced to choose whether to focus on building a stronger brand in a smaller market, or dilute their values in order to appeal to a wider one.

I think the companies who are speaking out against the ban and the Trump administration in general will be regarded favourably in the UK market, amongst others. Dove took a light-hearted but critical stance, running a tongue-in-cheek campaign in the UK as a way to communicate their message and throw Trump some shade simultaneously – with the copy reading a variety of cheeky lies including “New Dove antiperspirant boosts your Wi-Fi signal. #AlternativeFacts”. As a consumer, it makes me love Dove all the more for it, but as effective as this witty response is, it still raises the question – are companies fuelling the fire that is being kindled by the Trump administration? It’s undoubtedly advantageous for Trump to be creating so much noise in the media, so even when brands are in opposition to his polarising views, this may be helping the cause they are trying to fight.

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