

How brands can stay relevant in our hyper-politicised society

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It is a truism to say that wherever America leads, the rest-of-the-world will follow

The spectacle of prospective Supreme Court Judge Kavanaugh and his accuser Christine Blasey-Ford testifying to the US Senate was all over the media recently. The interesting thing for me wasn't just the testimony itself, but the response that we saw from politicians, commentators, and the general US public. Without exception people seemed to witness it through a political lens – those who support Trump saw a left-wing conspiracy that was ruining a good man's reputation. Everyone else saw a partisan nominee being exposed and held to account for his actions.

There seem to fewer and fewer facets of public life and conversation that haven't become politicised, particularly in the USA. Global warming, immigration, gender, sexuality,

healthcare, crime, education, the environment; the narrative for all is clearly split along political lines. Given that the UK seems to be moving in a similar direction, not least around Brexit, it seems fair to ask how brands should respond in a hyper politicised landscape.

In the past the obvious route was to avoid brand associations or initiatives that were overtly political, to avoid alienating any potential consumers. That is increasingly untenable and brands are being forced to show-their-hand and take a position on the society they operate in. The good news for those of us with a more progressive viewpoint is that most seem to be coming down on that side of the divide.

The Nike campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick has been discussed at length in the media, but not every brand can be this strident. I recently saw the latest TV spot in the McCain 'We Are Family' campaign, and it struck me as a more relevant and universal example of a brand setting out its position in a relevant and authentic way. For those who haven't seen it, the spot features real-life families of all kinds (gay, mixed-race, disabled, etc.) loving and supporting each other (and eating McCain products). Inevitably it provoked the usual backlash in social media, and the stars of the ad were subject to particularly nasty online abuse, but the message of inclusivity and broadening the notion of family resonated with many more.

It now feels to be time for mainstream brands to take a step out of their comfort zone, and adopt a position on the kind of society that they recognise and support. This could be through CSR, brand partnerships or paid-media, but it must be authentic and relatable if it is to resonate with today's politically aware consumers.

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