The Anatomy of Rebuilding & Recovery

A CEO LOUNGE INITIATIVE

A Playbook for Cause Marketing

Synergising business and social issues

In conversation with

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A Playbook for Cause Marketing

Consumers today are more socially aware than ever before. This sensitivity to the issues around them is transcending into their buying choices. Standing up for a social issue has not only become a strategy to optimise brand image, but a revenue generation and brand value decision as well. Are companies ready to integrate their support for social causes beyond optics, into their value system? How do they humanise their business? Is there a playbook that can enable the organisations to synergise their economic agenda with positive social outcomes? Some of the country's top marketing leaders discuss how marketing power can be used to create greater social impact.

Words by **Shilpa Singh Pisal**

"Millennials are more aware of society's many challenges than previous generations and less willing to accept maximising shareholder value as a sufficient goal for their work. They are looking for a broader social purpose and want to work somewhere that has such a purpose."[1]

- Michael Porter
Bishop William Lawrence University Professor at Harvard Business School

Business enterprises today are no more just about driving growth and maximising profits. Their ability to create social impact and their stand on social issues has started to matter more than ever. Marketing is now considered a key tool in their armoury to create social impact as well. In this age of cut-throat competition, social or purpose-driven marketing is helping brands to differentiate themselves and drive business while also championing social issues that directly impact society.

Today's consumers, largely millennials and GenZs, are hyper-aware of social issues and identify with business enterprises

that advocate for them. In a study carried out by ConComm[2], 78 per cent of the respondents asserted that they wanted companies to address important social justice issues. Eighty-seven per cent mentioned that they would purchase a product because a company advocated for an issue they cared about, and 76 per cent would refuse to purchase a company's products or services upon learning that the enterprise supported an issue contrary to their personal beliefs. "To win over its target customers, a business enterprise not only needs to focus on traditional marketing of its products but as a company, it needs to make its social values evident as well. Consumers want brands which are giving back to society, are doing purpose-driven marketing, taking up issues and causes that really matter. Marketing can play a huge impact on picking up these causes and making it big and bringing about the change, but is enough of it happening?" notes Sanchita Roy, Head of Strategy, Havas Media Group, India.

It becomes crucial to analyse if, as marketers and brand custodians with the power to bring about change,

enough efforts are being made and gaps are being identified in the present context. It also needs to be understood how the marketing playbook can be adapted to pick up social issues and create greater awareness making marketing more meaningful.

Dev Amritesh, Managing Director, Compass Group, India, contradicts the simplistic view that consumers prefer brands that take up social causes explaining that from his perspective, "It's the wrong question to treat standing for a social cause as an end. It's almost like putting up a value, and then, through the lens of that value, asking if organisations are doing enough. I have some fundamental issues with that approach — why should marketing people be doing it, how do they measure it, how will they say if this is enough or if we should do more..."

He elaborates, "Consumers feel attracted to the things they are interested in. So, the question shouldn't be *should marketing do more social work or have a social impact?* The larger question is, *what do the organisations believe in?*" He insists, "We should not think of a

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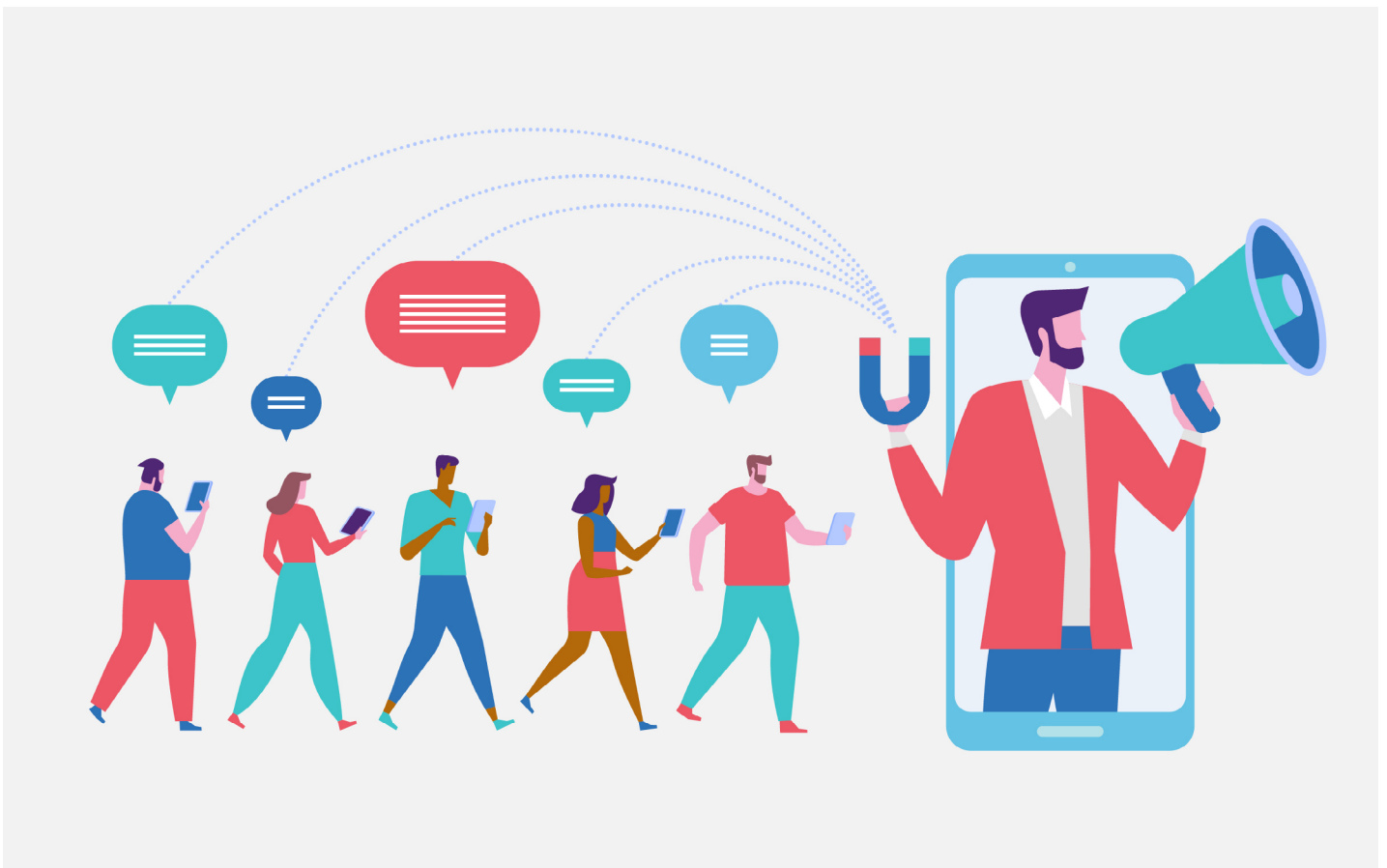
> *The world is generating 1.7 million billion bytes of data per minute. Knowledge is the engine and data the fuel. This data, if not analysed or shared, is like dust in the wind"*

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business organisation as a mere money-making entity, but as an organisation that embodies a set of values, a set of leadership beliefs. What it believes in has to be larger than its business and must impact the business, and add value to it, in a significant way."

This thought process has a domino effect — when businesses believe in something important to the world, everybody else believes in them as well. So, is a social cause fundamentally a part of your organisational agenda or are certain things done only for *optics*?

Citing the current trend of company boards including sustainability in their investment agenda and the pressure organisations are feeling to respond, Amritesh adds, "Incorporating social causes into their marketing playbook feels almost like a box that you need to tick to play the game. This may run the risk of being just a sliver of activities that a company needs to perform just to manage the optics. The actual conversation may need to focus on a deeper opportunity for the organisation to grow, attract great talent, to be great at what they do beyond the narrow commercial goals or social impact agenda."

DRIVING CHANGE THROUGH DATA

Zeeba Khan Kunnel, Founder & Director, Aubergine Properties, reflects on the concrete strategies that organisations can adopt to play a greater role in highlighting social causes. She reveals, "The world is generating 1.7 million billion bytes of data per minute. Knowledge is the engine and data the fuel. This data, if not analysed or shared, is like dust in the wind." She goes on to cite global case studies to support her argument: "The city of Portland[3] by using data to time its traffic lights has massively reduced its carbon footprint. Tracking cell phones to identify disease hotspots and potential clusters where health interventions were required has helped contain Ebola[4] in Africa. The mRNA research has been going on for over 10 years while Covid-19 just gave this technology an outlet." She also highlights the role of marketers here, "But because of the lack of awareness around this research, there has been a significant vaccine hesitancy. So, as marketers, we need to step back and analyse where the advocacy, information sharing and call to action

is required. In the age of extensive data availability, integrating business and social awareness among the consumers might also mean exploring the privacy vs security debate."

Roy supports this viewpoint, adding, "A lot of work being done today is purely for the optics. Consumers take issues that get publicised and what the media talks about at face value. But some companies are using data and technology to drive change in the world. As marketers, isn't it our responsibility to pick up those causes and issues and then see how we could leverage our might into driving awareness around it?"

"The problem is not with not knowing," remarks Sandeep Nagpal, Vice President - Global Marketing & Head of Marketing - India, Cvent, on the availability of data. He elaborates, "The problem is about credence. Is the data available credible? Can or should we put our might behind it? Companies need to examine who is creating the data, where it is coming from and if it is plausible enough to put its might behind it. In today's world, a lot of responsibility vests in the marketer."

Nagpal highlights the concept of "shared value — pursuing financial success in a way that yields societal benefit" propagated by Harvard academic, Michael Porter,[5] adding, "For the marketer, it has now become an economic value that he has to create. It is not sustainability, it is not social responsibility, it boils down to economic viability and economic value that you create for the brand." He also asserts, "There are hundreds of causes which may not lead to an economic value for a certain brand. So, businesses must identify issues they believe in and are sure of the credibility of the data rather than creating a factory of data and then put a might behind it to create amplitude."

The second aspect he addresses is the question: If a company will be investing in a cause through marketing for 'hype' or to create 'economic value'? "Are you willing to invest in that hype? There has to be a belief system that your brand believes in. Sometimes that belief is not permanent, and you have to be careful about that. Sometimes you've taken a stance and the environment is changing and you change that stance. You start putting your belief behind it and the assets start getting

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Head of Strategy, Havas
Media Group, India

created, the content gets created and then it replicates. I think that is where our space is — between what you believe in, privacy, and the data that you see."

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR SOCIAL CAUSES

Talking about the expansive data available on social media and harnessing this minefield for creating a social impact, Angira Agarwal, Chief Operating Officer, Skylo Technologies, points out, "Younger generations — GenZ and millennials — largely consume content through social media. It is imperative that social media and social impact go together." He says that unlike before, when Instagram was purely a picture-sharing app, it has now become a force in content sharing and advertising, fuelling business growth.

The eagerness for marketing companies to jump on the social impact bandwagon can be attributed to their use of prevalent issues to break through the clutter and leverage social causes to reach their audience by focusing on their virality on social media. This question of virality, however, must circle back to the brand's own set of

values, social beliefs, and of course, the willingness to invest in them.

The cause a company chooses to champion has to be its natural territory, something that is a natural extension of the enterprise. It is the marketer's job to amplify the cause towards the enterprise goals. Marketers often guide the organisational approach. However, companies cannot afford to support a social cause merely for 'hype' without demonstrating these beliefs in their actions. The business enterprise can gain clarity by differentiating between the reason for standing up for a social cause — whether for mass acceptance or for economic value.

PLAYING WITH THE PLAYBOOK — UNRESOLVED ISSUES

Roy emphasises, "The last 18 months alone have been a reawakening of sorts in how consumers perceive brands — wanting organisations to take up more social causes, do more and expect more of them." However, this crucial engagement to strike a balance between their economic pursuits and the social impact they want to create has not been observed on part of brands.

Nagpal reiterates, "We should not burden ourselves with too much responsibility. Not every brand is in the social domain. [As marketers and brands] We can contribute but it's only one part of the mix — it is not the strategy, and therefore there is a limitation."

Amritesh elucidates the marketing playbook for social impact, "Consumers gravitate towards brands that they like, doing things that they believe in. It is a misread to read this natural attraction as the consumers' desire for brands to do more for a social cause. Therefore, what is the playbook or model that allows organisations to answer the question — what should I go after as a brand? What are the three or four dimensions that I need to consider for me to pick that one theme that I must own? If a brand can understand this playbook and produce that idea to transform your organisation, then it is no more a question of finding a balance."

He adds, "For a brand to convincingly and successfully stand for a social cause, it has to be in its natural territory, and it shouldn't struggle. Besides, it should be something emergent in the culture that is interesting for them; something the brand hasn't touched so far. That is another dimension of the playbook."

In today's dynamic environment, businesses are moving past scope insensitivity and exploring a larger role in creating social awareness and solving social issues. With continuously evolving consumer behaviour, especially since the beginning of the pandemic, the question in the consumer's mind is not limited to the economic value of the product but whether the brand has shared ethical, social and sustainability values.

It's a time when marketers may consider creating a community around a prevalent social cause. Synergy with common themes can forge a deeper impact. It is also imperative for brands to question their efforts — whether they are solely for their individual identity or if they can forge an ecosystem. As Nagpal suggests, "Brands can come together and create a common belief impact."

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Angira Agarwal
Chief Operating Officer,
Skylo Technologies

TAKEAWAYS

1 **It is the need of the hour to humanise businesses.**

2 **Extensive availability of data can be leveraged to drive social change.**

3 **Organisations should identify causes that are fundamental to their value system that will also impact their business.**

4 **Marketers should seek to traverse beyond the silos they have been working in and create an ecosystem for the impact to have a wider reach.**

1 https://www.forbes.com/sites/danschawbel/2012/10/09/michael-e-porter-on-why-companies-must-address-social-issues/?sh=6cbed80a468a
2 https://www.conecomm.com/research-blog/2017-csr-study
3 Optimizing Traffic Signal Timing Significantly Reduces the Consumption of Fuel https://www.c40.org/case_studies/optimizing-traffic-signal-timing-significantly-reduces-the-consumption-of-fuel#:~:text=The%20City%20of%20Portland%20has,tons%20of%20CO2%20each%20year
4 Cellphone Data Might Help Predict Ebola's Spread https://www.technologyreview.com/2014/08/22/250264/cell-phone-data-might-help-predict-ebolas-spread/
5 https://hbr.org/2011/01/the-big-idea-creating-shared-value

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