

The Anatomy of Rebuilding & Recovery

A CEO LOUNGE INITIATIVE

Social Shenanigans or a Scrupulous Strategy?

Marketing's tryst with cause

In conversation with »



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Social Shenanigans or a Scrupulous Strategy?



Educating the girl child when you buy an instant ramen packet; making places disabled-friendly through tiles; raising political awareness via a cup of tea; helping spread smiles to marginalised communities through toothpaste; flying an airline that makes the earth greener... The world today is increasingly indulging in consumption philanthropy. Driven by the idea of cause marketing, this has given businesses a competitive edge, not through better price points but appealing to the consumers' conscience – nudging the consumer to create a positive impact through the right choices. Is the idea of cause marketing an effort towards social innovation, or a time-tested formula for a successful marketing campaign? CEO Lounge explores.

Words by **Divya Sista**

Planned behaviour — a classic marketing theory — dates back to the '80s where social scientists attempted to predict consumer behaviour through reasoned actions. This could not have been more relevant in today's world of social media everything. The underlying idea for consumer call-to-action anchors on virtue through reasonably easy ways — liking a page to support a cause or purchasing a product to save the earth. Consumption philanthropy — which in itself sounds like an oxymoron, given that consumption and philanthropy support and direct two starkly different ideologies — has an undeniable pull. Social media also gives the consumer the thrill of flamboyant display — the idea of doing good as you spend right.

WHO YOU SEE IS WHO YOU GET

Giving the consumer an idea of perceived power through embedded generosity gives the business's social credentials a boost. Ethical sourcing, fair trade and commitment to the planet are making their way into mission statements; marketing driven by moments cannot be left behind. Consumer research shows that close to a whopping 75 per cent of consumers today don't mind shifting brands when one is associated with a good cause, and the other is not.¹

"Marketing is in many ways a reflection of the society. The idea of marketing as a tool to invoke social consciousness is therefore an extension of what people want to be associated with individually — from sustainable living to equality for all. Ultimately brand messaging is not just selling products and services, but creating a long-lasting impact," explains Vidhu Sagar, Managing Director, MediaDonuts.

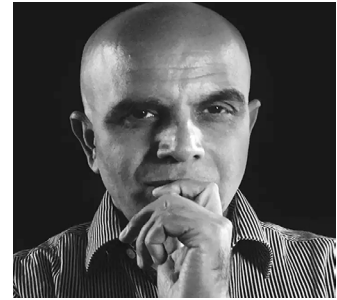
Marketing as a function is on the cusp of a monumental shift too. From being pillars of brand awareness and simple advertising, it is now a growth driver.

This new role of marketing being a value addition to a business's growth story through messaging is strategic in itself.

That said, brands are not just looking at this cause association as a simple, sure-shot successful marketing campaign. From the extension of the mandatory 2 per cent CSR (corporate social responsibility) budgets, to imaginative addendums of their mission statements, cause marketing is turning to be a perpetual message from the organisation.

"A business can no longer stick to traditional models and theories of marketing. With the idea of sustainability and social consciousness on the rise, consumers increasingly want to associate with businesses and brands that engage in purpose-driven marketing or have a definite moral compass," says Sanchita Roy, Head of Strategy, Havas Media Group.

This is evident from apparel brands' focus on ethical sourcing to newsrooms displaying modern anti-slavery statements to oil companies and tech giants committing to zero net



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Founder & CEO, Armsprime



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Dev Amrithesh
Managing Director, Compass Group India

carbon emissions.

"When did it become cool to mix brand messaging and social causes? We must understand that cause marketing in itself is about a very narrow target segment, but the messaging effect is huge because it is something good. If you look at great brand messaging in successful campaigns, you'll notice that it is a harmonious marriage between best resources deployed on brand building and social causes," reflects Kaacon Sethi, Chief Marketing Officer, Dainik Bhaskar Group.

THE RISE OF SLACKTIVISM

Marketing emulates and even magnifies social behaviour. Slacktivism — which began as a practice of displaying support on social media through petitions or online campaigns, often by copying and pasting statuses or messages (hashtag activism) — is an easy way to show commitment. The consumer gets a micro morale boost through the click

of a mouse, and the business gets an edge over its competition — a win-win of sorts. The strategy is also effective in curbing misinformation and the spread of knowledge. However, it is not as simple as it seems.

"It is true that consumers sway towards a brand that supports a social cause that is dear to them. But this cannot be a shallow tool to increase customer engagement. At some point, the organisation should ask itself if the idea of cause marketing it plans to engage in is an organic extension of its own beliefs and ideas. After all, an organisation is not just a profit-churning machine, but a collection of processes led by thoughts. Only then will it truly add value," propounds Dev Amrithesh, Managing Director, Compass Group India.

Marketing is increasingly becoming spread out and flat, the rapid penetration of technology ensuring that marketing efforts and campaigns come in various forms and levels. Though slacktivism may seem a fad, it could

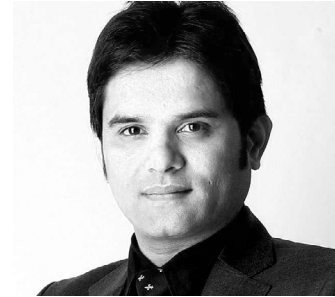
also be instrumental in reaching out to the grassroots and have a mass reach that could prove beneficial. In many cases — green activism, for instance — it may also turn into critical survival mechanisms.

“The information age has given birth to the informed consumer across age demographics. Today’s average consumer knows and understands her rights, choices and access. There is also increased access to a wide range of products, services, and more importantly, alternative ways of retail gratification. The consumer has an upper hand today with the power of information at her ready disposal. The intersection of social activism, information and choice are why we are witnessing a surge in cause-based communication. We must understand that communication is a very important part, but only a part of what an organisation stands for. With the growing emphasis on ESG- (environmental, social and governance)

based reporting and funding, businesses are looking towards a better ESG scorecard as it affects their financial standing as well. Even lenders and investors want to be associated with organisations and businesses with clean records and green initiatives,” insists Manish Mandhana, CEO, Mandhana Retail Ventures.

Authentic messaging through goal-driven marketing is a tight-rope walk. The rise of moment marketing, where brands and organisations insert themselves into the ‘moment’ — hashtags or conversations surrounding a trend — makes seem it a fast-paced landscape.

“It becomes extremely vital for an organisation to demarcate its social cause from moment marketing. In a world where content is consumed by the second, it is both easy and difficult to blend social media and social purpose. Platforms themselves are changing — WhatsApp is used for payments today, and Facebook is used



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Vice President - Global Marketing & Head of Marketing - India, Cvent

for business — and this resonates with the marketing today,” reflects Angira Agarwal, Chief Operating Officer, Skylo Technologies.

PROOF OF THE PUDDING LIES IN THE EATING

The use of marketing as messaging is not new to India. The iconic Amul girl, with witty slogans and award-winning social commentary, has often reflected the public sentiment of euphoria and dissent — a fine example of moment marketing. Cause-based marketing also dons the avatar of advocacy, identifying causes, educating consumers, and even facilitating fundraising drives. Identifying the cause is key, for it promises both social and financial results.

“The motivation to associate themselves with a cause differs based on the industry, geography and target segment. Affiliation and association if not chosen right may end up hindering the primary stream,” quips Amrithesh.

Social messaging gone wrong can have detrimental effects on the brand image. Take Pepsi’s 2017 campaign as a case in point. While Pepsi believed that political activism would give it traction, it came across as inauthentic and was touted as one of the biggest marketing fails of the year. It may also take a turn for the worse creating misinformation.

“Marketing with a purpose, creating impact is not just about making fun, or powerful advertisements that capture consumer attention. Marketers are in a responsible position today, where their message carries a weight beyond plain visibility. It is something that adds direct value in social currency and monetary terms,” remarks Sandeep Nagpal, Vice President - Global Marketing & Head of Marketing - India, Cvent.

Institutions have embedded purpose into operations, finance, marketing and every other sphere. However, it plays a supplementary role in the form of corporate social responsibility,

compliance to institutional directives, or a sense of self-directed duty to the local community or stakeholders.

“For a marketer, the goal is to increase shareholder value or meet a set goal. We didn’t have a metric to measure cause marketing earlier. To make cause marketing mainstream, we have to make social messaging consistent; the organisation as a whole needs to commit to a certain purpose and help the marketer communicate it. The brand has to believe in the campaign so that if anything goes wrong, it will stand up for it and explains the stance. Collective accountability is important. Wherever cause marketing is done purposefully, it improves brand scores manifold,” informs Sanjay Tripathi, Founder & CEO, Armsprime.

Purpose has now pivoted to turn into a central nerve centre of everything the organisation embarks upon — from strategic decisions to financial investments. It has turned into a common thread that manifests itself across verticals that drive each

action. With organisations adopting data analytics, artificial intelligence and big data to drive their marketing efforts, balancing the sense of purpose and objectivity is key.

“Does everything have to be directly measurable to reflect success? Are we ignoring the monkey on the table because we can’t see immediate results? Tata Tea, for instance, does not mention the tea specifically but is a brand built on social messaging. Everyone identifies with it instantaneously. This sense of instant identity is built over time. However, the want of it and moment marketing are precarious because they brings us to the question of brand building. The timeline to launch, build and secure a foothold for a brand is shrinking,” says Sanjeev Shukla, Founder-Director, TerraHealth.

THE POWER OF PURPOSE

Good marketing may change the sales figure on a balance sheet, but great marketing has the power to change things. Marketing is an art that not just persuades the consumer to buy or take



“The timeline to launch, build and secure a foothold for a brand is shrinking”

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Seasoned Marketing Leader; Founder, TerraHealth



“Industries could look at social campaigns beyond advertising. It could be investing in training or empowering a marginalised section through skill development, where the brand is creating a sense of shared value, a market niche”

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President, Diversey (APAC)

notice but nudges them to think in the right direction.

“Social campaigns are always long-term ideas, which is why purpose being the common thread makes sense. It is a constant in all marketing campaigns. At the end of the day, all campaigns need not be socially justified — every campaign and brand can’t have a social theme. Certain industries like healthcare or FMCG find it easier to get to social marketing initiatives, and a few do not. These industries could look at social campaigns beyond advertising. It could be investing in training or empowering a marginalised section through skill development, where the brand is creating a sense of shared value, a market niche. These are things which go beyond the tick-in-the-box social cause marketing spend,” explains Himanshu Jain, President, Diversey, APAC.

While purpose-driven marketing or marketing for a social cause may even be a solution in a few cases, as seen in Dove’s campaign for real beauty

or Fair & Lovely changing its product name (now Glow & Lovely) to emphasise its disassociation with skin colour to buttress its reputation, there are risks as well. Especially when cause marketing as an idea is not relevant to the business.

“If it does not align with the brand’s promise, social marketing is not a coherent proposition. Say, a pulse polio campaign wouldn’t make sense for a brand selling designer handbags. But what is possible, is sharing talent and time. The corporate sector is rich with ideas, talent and intent. The government can pool in talent and indicate that talent spend is also a significant contribution to a social cause,” remarks Gautam Khanna, CEO, PD Hinduja Hospital and Medical Research Centre & Head, Hinduja College of Nursing.

Marketing for a social cause must be true in both letter and spirit. When done right it is good for society as a whole effort, but a failure would result in unintended consequences, including but not limited to a tainted image.



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TAKEAWAYS

- 1 **Cause marketing is a long-term brand building exercise.**
- 2 **Cause marketing cannot be confused with CSR or moment marketing on social media.**
- 3 **Not all brands can engage in advertising-driven social cause marketing.**
- 4 **Ways to engage in cause marketing beyond advertising — skill development, shared causes, market building etc.**



¹ <https://www.conecomm.com/news-blog/cone-releases-first-cause-consumer-behavior-study>

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