

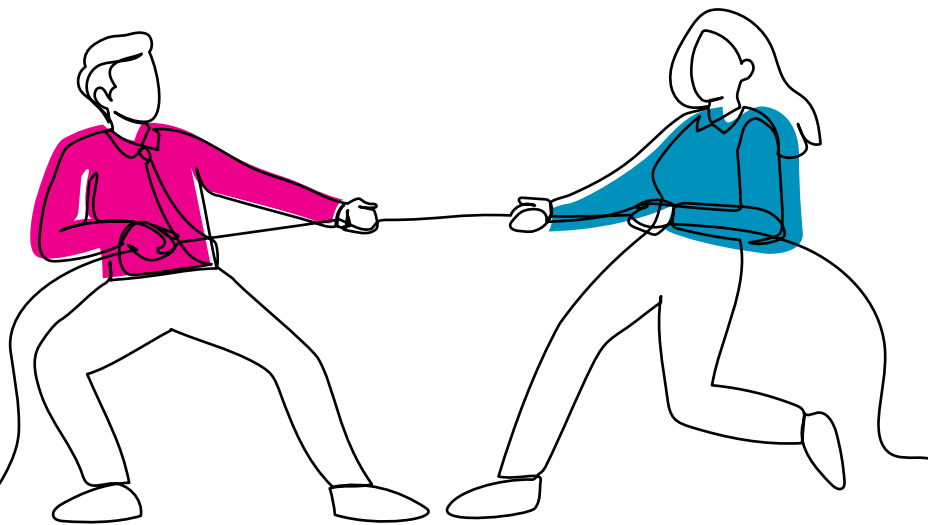


By Rick Lyke, APR
Mower Executive Vice President
of Public Relations & Public Affairs



Mission, Vision and Values Alignment is Critical in the Culture Wars Era

It may feel like Culture Wars are pulling America apart with a growing level of distrust between the political right and the left. Increasingly, people say they don't want to live near, work with or even love someone from the other side of the political spectrum. But the reality is that Culture Wars are nothing new in America and navigating them is essential to business.



C-Suite executives, corporate communicators and marketers have three choices in today's environment:

Adopt a staunch neutrality approach by never commenting on any issue.



Become hyperactive by taking stands on the controversy of the day.



Focus on issues that are core to their corporate ethos and critical to key stakeholders.





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A History of Divides

James Davison Hunter, a University of Virginia professor, introduced the term in the U.S. in his 1991 book, “Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America.” Hunter presented a picture where cultural issues involving family, religion, diversity, reproductive healthcare, LGBTQ+ rights, gun laws and other issues were polarizing. Germany in the 1870s went through a similar divide called Kulturkampf (Cultural Struggle), when the Catholic Church and Prussian government wrestled over things like control of the education system and ecclesiastical appointments to key government positions. These battles spilled into other issues of the day, including anti-Polish nationalism in eastern sections of the country that were historically part of Poland.



Culture Wars are intertwined with American history. Protests over taxation without representation that grew into the American Revolution were the Culture Wars of that day. Change often starts from a Culture Wars spark. Abolitionism to Prohibition and women’s suffrage to Vietnam War protests are notable examples. Culture Wars generate news. They are the subject of vocal movements. They can divide families and end friendships. Today, Culture Wars are amplified by social media and have become weaponized as part of political debate.



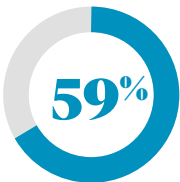
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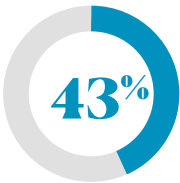
Staying Neutral is Not Easy

Brands find themselves in an uneasy place. It's a charged environment where people are willing to move to another state, quit their jobs and even divorce the people they love because of differences they cannot imagine bridging. Culture Wars present real exposure. Your goal should not be to put your organization at the center of each and every debate. Companies struggle to decide if, when and how they should address significant social and cultural issues. On the one hand, there is no compelling reason to take a stand unless it makes sense for your brand at a core level. On the other hand, failing to take a stand can be just as dangerous in certain circumstances. In a world where customers, employees and other stakeholders feel empowered to ask what a company is doing, saying and even thinking about a major issue, neutrality can feel nearly impossible.

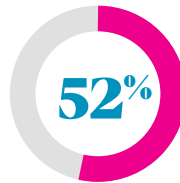
A Gallup 2022 poll asked 5,700 Americans how they felt about businesses taking a public stance on political and social issues. Guess what?



Younger adults were more likely to support companies taking a stand, with 59% of 18-29 year olds saying it was OK.



Only 43% of those 60 years and older want companies to take a stand.



say businesses should not take a public stance on political and social issues, and 48% say they should.

There is also a political divide on this issue, with

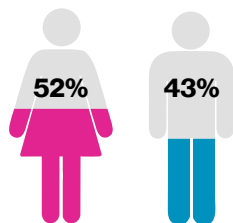
75%
of Democrats

40%
of Independents

18%
of Republicans

in support of companies taking a political or social stand.

Women are somewhat more likely (52%) than men (43%) to prefer businesses to take a public stance.



There are also racial differences in thinking on this issue, with more than

70%
of Black or Asian

49%
of Hispanic

41%
of White

adults supporting this idea.

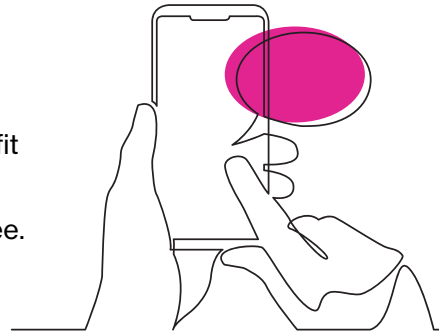


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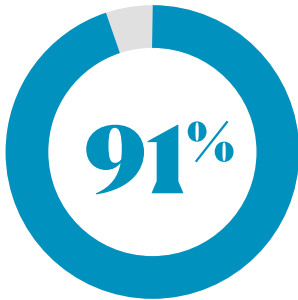


Taking a stance on social issues can be a double-edged sword.

However, multiple recent studies show that there appears to be a net benefit in taking a stance. The positive impact when stakeholders agree with a company's position often outweighs the negative impact when they disagree.

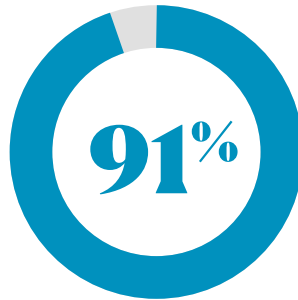


The PwC Trust in U.S. Business Survey from 2023 found

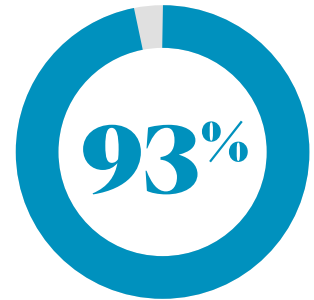


of business leaders believe the ability to build and maintain trust improves the bottom line.

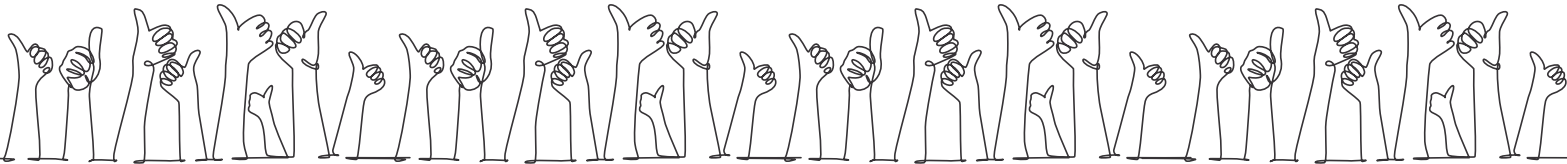
This is backed by a PwC 2022 survey that found



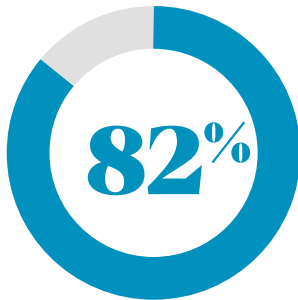
of consumers are likely to buy from a company they trust and



of employees feel more loyal to a company they trust.

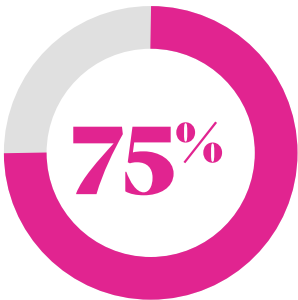


A Harris Poll in April 2022 found



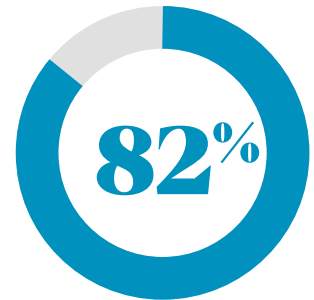
of shoppers prefer consumer brands that have values that align with their own and

In 2020, a Harris Poll found



of consumers say they've stopped buying from a company because of a conflict in values.

In 2020, a Harris Poll found



of individual investors were more likely to buy the stock of a company/brand/product they love.



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While the importance of trust is recognized, the Edelman 2024 Trust Barometer indicates that consumer trust is at all-time lows when it comes to making sure innovations are safe, understood and accessible.

**A score of 60% or above is needed to be considered as “trusted,”
 but here is where key groups scored:**



According to the Edelman study, global consumers believe there is a lack of strong government regulation, waning faith in traditional leaders and suspicion of science’s independence from politics and money.

Shared Values and Direction

This lack of trust makes it difficult for brands, especially when many aspects of society might appear to be teetering on a permanent crisis state. Permacrisis is a trend some politicians use as a fundraising tool. Certain businesses use permacrisis, with the fear and uncertainty it brings, as a marketing tool. They are the “chaos is our brand” companies. For most brands, a state of permacrisis is damaging and disruptive. That’s why mission, vision and values alignment is so critical. Companies need to focus on running their businesses. Yes, you need to anticipate what might be over the horizon, but if you fear every curve in the road and every intersection you cross, the journey becomes nearly impossible.

The brands that are successfully navigating the Culture Wars have a strong recognition of the roll of mission, vision and values in managing their businesses. Mission, vision and values statements are not just a bunch of feel-good platitudes, and they’re not a declaration of hardline social or political positions. In an increasingly divided world, it is more critical than ever to achieve:

Alignment of your brand with what you see as critical to future survival, profit, liquidity and growth.

Agreement with public facing ESG, CSR and DEI positions.

Affinity with the expectations of key stakeholder audiences.

Acknowledgement that your policies, products and programs are not political statements.



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Alignment of your mission, vision and values is critical. This is an ongoing process. As new policy statements are developed, they need to be reviewed and must go through all the approval steps. Knowing your customers and employees is vital, while authenticity is essential. You have to walk the walk and talk the talk. Failure to do so will get you called out. At the same time, doing it right can pay dividends.

A PwC Global CEO Survey in 2022 found that companies where employees were aligned with company values and direction were **twice as likely to outperform competitors that were not aligned by bottom line margins of at least 10%.**

Finding Common Ground

Recognize the polarized environment. When it feels like the time is right, engage through policy and practice, not politics. Not every company feels comfortable with public engagement on Culture Wars issues, just as not every company feels comfortable remaining silent. Even quiet, non-public engagement can be useful. Create a safe zone for employees to speak regardless of their views. Respect and welcome customers with various viewpoints. Respecting their viewpoints, as long as they do not cross a line where it is damaging to other people's rights or the health of your brand, creates legitimacy for your brand's right to have a point of view.

Companies can make a difference in the public discourse and lessen the Culture Wars tension. By aligning with mission, vision and values, you can focus on community needs, listen intently for collaborative opportunities and work towards common sense solutions.



Mower Corporate Alignment: Mission, Vision and Values in the Culture Wars Era is the latest reputation building workshop from the agency to go alongside its highly successful media training and crisis simulation programs. The immersive session features classroom instruction, a collaborative critique of existing statements, and a creative work session to update and align corporate mission, vision and values.

