

How PR professionals can talk about social impact...the right way

By Jenna Vasquez

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A young boy receives his Ben & Jerry's ice cream from the company's "Justice" truck. Ben & Jerry's is one of many companies whose PR rhetoric reflects the social causes it supports. (Picture Credit: prnewswire.com)

It's March 2020. Every company whose email list you've ever subscribed to is reaching out to let you know how they're handling the COVID-19 pandemic, because they care about the safety of their customers.

It's May 2020. Brands are coming out of the woodworks to declare their support of Black Lives Matter and to make sure they are known as a place that fosters diversity and inclusion. Companies that have rarely spoken on racism decide it's time to change their rhetoric.

Rewind to January 2020—why weren't so many companies speaking out on social issues before a pandemic and outrage over systemic racism basically forced them to do so? We might roll our eyes a little bit when a company that has never taken up a social cause before is suddenly posting about its "commitment to social justice." But why? It's doing a good thing, right? Maybe not.

As a PR professional, your job is to make your company look good. While there's nothing wrong with focusing on the social good that your company is doing or having an altruistic angle to your news and media content, you have to realize that there is a wrong way and time to talk about your company's impact. There's a chance you've been doing it wrong all along. But the good news is, that means there's a right way, and that's where the following tips come in.

Avoid the "not my problem" mentality

Ben and Jerry's (an icon in the world of brand activism) has a page on its website dedicated to the issues that the company cares about—there are 11. While it could be argued that you're better off specializing in one issue rather than trying to support the whole spectrum of them, quite the opposite is often true.

What it comes down to is this: at least Ben and Jerry's *cares*. No one had to wonder when the COVID-19 pandemic hit if the company was going to speak up, and it didn't feel out of place when it did so.

Steven Fox, a marketing professional with years of experience in the social impact sector and current managing director at Brigham Young University's Ballard Center for Social Impact, puts it this way: "It's hard to fault any organization that is trying to do measurable good, whether its for one cause or for 100 causes." So, if your organization has the capacity to work on more problems than one, do it.

As a PR professional, you are the one behind the voice of the company. It's up to you to ensure that voice is being proactive rather than reactive to social issues around the world. It's okay to have an issue your company stands for, but don't get caught being silent because something is "not your problem."

Bottom line: Speak up, and do so often. That way, you avoid your company being labeled as a "bandwagoner" when it comes to social issues.

(www.benjerry.com)

Steer clear of the savior complex (and do your research)

TOMS shoe company started out as the classic 'see a need, fill a need' company. Its founder noticed on a trip to Argentina how the children were walking around with no shoes and decided to found a company built on the premise that for each pair of shoes bought, another pair would be given to a child in a developing country who didn't have any.

Sounds great in theory. In practice, TOMS fell victim to the savior complex, as explained by Sarita Hartz, a life coach and writer. Without thoroughly

researching the real problems faced by children and families in developing countries, the company ended up doing more harm than good—some kids even spent *less* time studying or in school when given shoes, because they chose to play outside instead.

As your company's PR representative, you set the tone and choose the rhetoric. You may not be the mastermind behind the company executives' ideas, but you can do your research. Embarrassment in the world of PR is bound to happen at one point or another, but don't let it be because you promote a cause that's actually doing the opposite of good in the world.

Fox puts it this way: "Don't pretend to be the Red Cross. Know your place. We're grateful you're doing good things, but don't tell us about it 24/7 or exaggerate what you're doing. That's where humility comes in. But, definitely don't be silent about the good things that your company is doing."

Bottom line: Most companies want to do good, but let your role as a PR professional be to ensure that your company is actually having a meaningful impact—not just putting on a good front.

(www.vox.com)

Incorporate data and tug at the heartstrings

Too often, PR professionals focus too much on either data or emotion but forget that both need to be used in conjunction—especially when talking about social impact. Consider these two approaches to talking about impact:

**"Give credit where credit is due.
It brings an element of
humility that is crucial to what
you're talking about."**

-Steven Fox

1. In 2016, Global Inc. donated 12.87 million boxes of school supplies to children in India and 40 other countries, exceeding its goal to compile and donate 10 million boxes in the course of 12 months.

2. Abdul gets to go to school with a new pencil and notebook today. He'd been using his hand-me-down stub of a pencil to take notes on paper scraps until Global Inc. provided him with a fresh set of school supplies and allowed him to continue on his educational journey. Abdul now gets better grades *and* has a better home life, thanks to Global Inc's pencil and notebook donation.

Neither is inherently bad, but both miss the mark. Why?

The former is all data. We get numbers and outputs but nothing to make you feel something. And the latter has the opposite problem. We're happy for Abdul, but we have no tangible evidence that Global Inc.'s donation is actually the reason for this positive outcome in his life.

Try this updated version:

Abdul now gets better grades and has a better home life, thanks to Global Inc's pencil and notebook donation back in 2015. Abdul is one of thousands of children who took part in a five-year controlled experiment by Global Inc. The question? Does providing school supplies to children improve their home life? After collecting and analyzing a number of key indicators over the course of the study, Global Inc. announced today that children in India who receive a pencil and notebook from the company upon entering 2nd grade are three times more likely to treat their siblings with kindness and two times more likely to help out around the house.

Fox sums up nicely what the ideal combination of data and storytelling looks like: "Use actual data. It's okay if your company comes from humble beginnings. It's okay if you only helped 20 people your first year. Don't worry about taking credit; just worry about making known the good things you are doing, and if those aren't grand yet, that's okay."

Bottom line: The best stories include both data *and* pathos—because using both is the ideal way to talk correctly about your company's impact from a PR perspective.

Social impact and PR can be friends

In today's world, social impact and PR need to be more intertwined than ever. Consumers want to buy from brands that are doing good things in the world, and they're often even willing to pay more for a brand that is. The key is to *be* one of those brands, and really do your research so you know you're saying the right things.

So, as the PR professional, you are tasked with presenting the right message to the consumer. More than ever, it's important to masterfully balance purpose and profit. Hopefully, you feel better equipped to do so and truly dive into the world of social impact PR. Trust me, it's a thrilling one.

Author Bio:

Jenna is studying public relations with minors in business and French. She is from Spokane, Washington, and she hopes to build a career in the social impact sector. She is currently the director of communications for Ballard Brief—a social issues publishing startup based out of Brigham Young University's Ballard Center for Social Impact.

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