

Taking a Stand: The Increased Call for Corporate Responsibility & The Role of Digital Marketers (October 2022)

As we learn from the business community, we want to share that information with our community of educators and business professionals. One trend highlighted during a Fall 2021 digital marketing focus panel is the growth of corporate responsibility positions and the involvement of digital marketers. The following Action Brief is a synthesis of panel participants' insights and findings from additional research.

The Call for Corporate Responsibility

For many, 2020 was a pivotal, turbulent year. The summer especially was marked by social activation and unrest, as months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the murder of George Floyd, and the anticipation of a major upcoming election ignited calls for worker safety, law enforcement accountability, and comprehensive change.

In response, businesses across the nation felt compelled to take [public stances on issues of concern](#) to consumers, such as systemic racism and injustice, in an unprecedented display of corporate action. For example, large corporations—[like PepsiCo, Adidas, and Netflix](#)—pledged financial support and commitment to company initiatives promoting diversity and inclusion.

In the years since, it's difficult to quantify the implementation and impact of these corporate promises. But one clear truth emerges from research and the responses of panel participants: the call for **corporate responsibility** (the duty of businesses to contribute to the well-being of society; also called corporate social responsibility) remains. Consumers want to support and engage with companies that align with their values—and businesses are answering the call.

Why Companies Are Answering the Call

It's possible that companies are investing more in corporate responsibility (CR) endeavors purely out of benevolence, but research shows there's a simpler answer: it's good for business.

[According to Investopedia](#), businesses often experience greater employee engagement, risk mitigation, investor relations, and brand recognition as a result of CR efforts, all of which benefit a business's bottom line. A recent [study of American consumers](#) by public relations and marketing firm Cone Communications found that "87% will purchase a product because a company advocated for an issue they cared about and 76% will refuse to purchase a company's products or services upon learning it supported an issue contrary to their beliefs."

It's never easy to win customers' trust and support—but in today's competitive market, it's harder than ever for new companies to stand out from the crowd. For many companies, panel participants said, corporate responsibility initiatives provide a distinct competitive advantage. For example, Tim Stobierski of the [Harvard Business School Online](#) writes that CR efforts can be "a powerful marketing tool, helping a company position itself favorably in the eyes of consumers, investors, and regulators."

According to panel participants, companies, propelled by consumer demand and the potential for profit, are therefore making greater investments in CR as part of reputation and brand management—a major responsibility of digital marketers.

How Companies (& Digital Marketers) Are Answering the Call

Given the increased consumer demand, [CR positions are gaining momentum](#) and becoming increasingly important, especially in digital spaces as a result of the pandemic. Panel participants shared that digital marketers are uniquely responsible for educating audiences about company CR efforts, developing outreach initiatives, and reporting on impact. In other words, they're making sure that companies are actively part of the conversation rather than avoiding the tough topics that are important to consumers.

After all, it's not enough for a company to simply *say* it's committed to a cause or initiative. For many consumers, seeing is believing. According to the [Harvard Business Review](#), "research suggests that people only truly believe that their company has a purpose and clear values when they see management making a decision that sacrifices short-term profitability for the sake of adhering to those values."

Therefore, it's up to digital marketers to build a customer experience that responds to the needs of consumers who use their purchasing power for causes they care about. For example, an article from [creative digital agency SMACK](#) lists the following CR practices:

- Environmental awareness
- Philanthropic efforts
- Fair trade sourcing of product materials or ingredients
- Sustainability
- Fair and equal pay
- Equal opportunity employment
- Community involvement
- Employee satisfaction
- Self-reporting (transparency)

For many companies, though, CR efforts may be easier said than done. [According to Investopedia](#), "highly-publicized, expensive campaigns are colorful but... [do] little to eradicate the root sources of problems." Instead, the most effective CR strategies involve connecting a company's product(s) to a related cause. Much of this work is done in digital spaces, as panel participants shared that digital marketers' CR work often involves the following:

- Providing free online tools to underserved communities
- Focusing on digital communities and providing support and advocacy programs/events
- Using social media to test for success in building an audience
- Working with other companies (like [Higher Logic](#)) to be able to build this community

The calls for corporate responsibility may wax and wane in the coming years, but it's unlikely that demand for company accountability will ever go away. Until societal issues have all been eradicated—an impossible, but worthwhile goal—companies should anticipate this demand, build CR into their reputation and brand management strategies, and recognize the important role that digital marketers play in this effort.

Links for Further Reading:

- [Corporate Responsibility: An Introduction](#)
- [Breaking Down the 4 Types of Corporate Social Responsibility](#)
- [Survey: What Americans Want from Corporate America During the Response, Reopening, and Reset Phases of the Coronavirus Crisis](#)
- [Adapting Corporate Social Responsibility to COVID-19](#)
- [How the Pandemic is Changing Corporate Social Responsibility and What You Can Do About It](#)
- [15 Eye-Opening Corporate Social Responsibility Statistics](#)

Discussion Questions:

- Have you ever made a buying decision based on a company's stances, values, and/or support toward a certain cause? Why or why not?
- In what way(s) have you seen companies respond to different issues and current events, if at all? How did you feel about these responses as a consumer? If applicable, how did you feel about these responses as an employee?
- What role did the pandemic play in accelerating the call for corporate responsibility? How did it impact the responsibilities of digital marketers?
- Is it fair to ask businesses to potentially suspend money-earning activities in order to operate more sustainably/ethically/responsibly? How should companies balance profit and values?

Sources:

- [Hashtags Won't Cut It. Corporate America Faces a Higher Bar in a Reckoning on Racial Inequality](#)
- [These are the Corporate Responses to the George Floyd Protests that Stand Out](#)
- [Corporate Social Responsibility \(CSR\) Explained with Examples](#)
- [2017 Cone Communications CSR Study](#)
- [Types of Corporate Social Responsibility to be Aware Of](#)
- [CSR and ESG Job Opportunities are on the Rise: Certificate in Corporate Social Responsibility Gets Candidates Ready](#)
- [Coronavirus is Putting Corporate Social Responsibility to the Test](#)
- [Why Is Social Responsibility Important in Marketing?](#)
- [Corporate Social Responsibility—Using Digital to Get Your CSR Efforts Heard](#)