today:tomorrow

THE VOTES ARE IN

Today is Election Day in the United States. Like so many, I have been inundated these past several months with emails, texts, and calls urging me to vote. Social media is awash in celebrities attempting to use their influence to drive up poll numbers.

I am working on my 2021 trends report as we speak, but I can't overlook the trends I am seeing now, in this political hot zone. Here are three that have risen to the top.

SHOW US WHAT YOU STAND FOR

The golden rule of brand communications is NEVER get political. Why alienate a proportion of your customer base when there is little to no upside? But in the last five years, a change has snuck up on us that crystalized by the events of 2020. Both politics and social issues have become far more polarizing, and the collective voice of citizen-consumers at times is drowning out that of politicians. Virtually everything is seen through a political lens now—from what media sources you consume to where you shop and what brands you favor.

People are demanding change—and many do not consider governments up to the task. They now expect brands to use their influential platforms and policies to support sociopolitical and environmental progress. We have certainly seen that in the long-overdue global movement to end systemic racism and secure social justice—kindled by the introspection of the Great Pause of this pandemic and ultimately sparked by the death of George Floyd.

But can brands really reap rewards by leaping into the fray? The answer is yes—when handled right. In July, I wrote that brands can connect with customers in more essential ways—including by actively supporting social progress, reimagining their offerings and points of connection, and providing added value in line with current consumer sentiment, consciousness, and consumption trends. The KPMG Me, My Life, My Wallet 2020 report supports this notion, finding that 90 percent of consumers globally are willing to pay more for goods sold by

Once a popular shopping destination among the integrated resorts and casinos, the Venetian Macao Grand Canal Shoppes, Macau, China, stands empty due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

ethical retailers, and 56 percent say the environmental and social practices of a company influence their purchase choices. Another study by KPMG, this one in the U.K., found that over one-third of consumers feel it is more important today that a brand's values match their own—spiking to 52 percent among those ages 18–34.

Marketers should enter into the political realm by focusing on a solution to the issue and expressing clearly how it ties into their brand. Airbnb did that with its 2017 Super Bowl advertisement opposing the U.S. ban on refugees and immigrants from several nations, mostly Muslim. It can also be effective to put a human face behind a brand's social activism, as Patagonia did for so many years with its founder Yvon Chouinard and as Salesforce is doing with its outspoken leader, Marc Benioff. Putting CEOs front and center has been shown to have an impact on consumer behavior.

Brands should think hard before taking a stand—ensuring they are doing it for the right reasons (PR alone doesn't count) and are prepared to back up their words with concrete actions—but they shouldn't be so cautious that they miss the opportunity to contribute to progress in meaningful ways. That's a sure way to be pushed into irrelevancy by bolder competitors.

WE ARE ALL MODERATORS

The first U.S. presidential "debate" in this election cycle exemplified the extent to which the commotion and cacophony of words so common today have seeped beyond our screens and into politics and our cultural discourse. What struck me most from that debacle is how vital members of the media have become as moderators—and how they are failing in that essential role. To his credit, Fox News host Chris Wallace—purportedly the moderator of that event—admits to having done some "soul-searching" in its aftermath, acknowledging that what took place in Cleveland was a disservice to the electorate and to the political process.

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29% Americans worry about bias in their own media diets.

We are drowning in media today—and yet how much of the information we take in actually informs our thinking or opens us up to new ideas? How much of it challenges our biases and preconceptions? A Gallup/Knight Foundation poll on "American Views 2020: Trust, Media and Democracy" found that most Americans believe their go-to news sources are at least somewhat biased, but they are substantially more likely to worry

about bias in the media diets of others (69 percent) than in their own (29 percent).

Today we have social media, digital platforms, and what can seem like an infinite number of TV channels from which to choose. But rather than open our worlds, digital platforms employ algorithms and personal data to create personalized echo chambers that fill our heads with what we and like-minded others already "know" to be true—in effect, narrowing our views.

If the stakes weren't so high, perhaps we could view this skewing of information with amusement rather than alarm. I share the view that this is not possible when misinformation and, worse, disinformation risk influencing election outcomes, lowering vaccination rates, and sowing confusion in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. We need rigorous reporting and expert fact-checking now more than ever. Objective "truths" are no longer sacrosanct. They are open to twisting and interpretation and even outright rejection—with potentially fatal effect. While brands routinely employ storytelling to draw in consumers, marketers must be vigilant in not allowing these messages to stray from the truth. In this era of murkiness and fake everything, integrity may be the most powerful brand value that exists today.

We all share in a collective responsibility—as marketers and as citizens—to prevent society from succumbing to falsehoods and half-truths. I have been happy to see the amped-up safeguards Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms have begun to put in place to champion fact over fiction. I don't think

Riders on a Paris metro in 2020.

this problem of misinformation will be solved, however, until audiences take responsibility for monitoring and moderating their news consumption. Each of us needs to do the hard work of thinking critically, including taking the time to vet sources, separate opinion from fact, and ferret out personal and political agendas.

This once "invisible" job of the moderator is now each of ours. We need to approach this job with rigor and a commitment to air the truth (even when it's not to our liking)—and insist others do the same.

CAN WE HANDLE THE TRUTH?

A modern conundrum is that, even as we distrust news found online, we continue to rely on it. A new Harris Poll on "Trust in U.S. News Media," conducted with Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, revealed that more than eight in 10 people surveyed (82 percent) are concerned about what is real or fake on the internet, and more than two-thirds (67 percent) distrust news on social media. And yet 42 percent—including 54 percent of millennials and 62 percent of Gen Zs—consume news on social media each week.

Our reliance on questionable "news" is dangerous in the best of times, but particularly now, as the COVID-19 pandemic evolves in real time. People are searching for facts that may not yet be established within a news environment teeming with disinformation. Combine this with society's insatiable urge to "doomscroll"—continually seeking bad news online—and you have a fertile breeding ground for uncertainty and unsubstantiated "facts."

In August, I talked about the yin and yang of this year. No doubt, we will continue to see contradictions—what consumers say they want versus what they show us they want via their actions is one. For brands, now more than ever, we need campaigns that remind people to question sources and seek truth. In the modern era, brands are no longer just purveyors of goods; at their best, they are sources of information, forces for sociopolitical change, and trusted allies.

The scene outside the New York Times building in Manhattan.

Marian Salzman

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Forbes

Anyone Pining for 'Formal Fridays'

Attitudes toward formality change, just as fashions do, but it has been fascinating to watch the speed at which casual culture has overtaken our world these past several decades.

Me(Dia) as Moderator

It sometimes seems as though we are drowning in media sources—and yet how much of the information we take in actually informs our thinking or opens us up to new ideas?

The Power of One

We cannot regain lost ground—much less progress—until we prioritize collaboration and community over divisiveness and individualism.

The Bittersweet Pairings щf 2020

It's true that these past few months have at times felt as if we were living in an alternate universe, but they've also provided a case study on the inevitability of the yin and the yang.

Trust Misinformation and Why Brands Need to Be More Careful Than Ever

Fake or faux seems to be the word and sentiment of the moment, a cry for truth but also a way of life.

Marketing to the New Consumer

What changes can industries, companies, and brands make today to shape a better tomorrow?

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