

**TRENDS AND BEST PRACTICES IN**

# **BRAND PURPOSE COMMUNICATION**

A study by **USC**Annenberg in collaboration with  
*Center for Public Relations*





## Trends and Best Practices in Brand Purpose Communication

*A Research Study by the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations and PRWeek*

Julia Kiefaber, Cathy Park, Sara Lattman, Rosemary Xu,  
Micaela Stevens, ZaZu Lippert, Burghardt Tenderich\*

\* PI and contact

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## About This Study

The goal for this report is to provide communication practitioners with actionable insight into how to engage in and lead discussions about issues of relevance to society. Doing so is no longer an option, but increasingly, an imperative. Evidence is mounting that younger people in particular are choosing where to buy and where to work based on brand actions and communications on major global issues, including social justice and the climate crisis.

Our team at the USC Annenberg Center for PR began research on this topic in January 2020, just two months before the COVID-19 pandemic hit and only four months before the killing of unarmed Black Americans sparked global protest and calls for police reform in the United States. These events further amplified the already-growing need to provide guidance to practitioners, which is now more important than ever. Today's corporate leaders feel mounting pressure to engage in purpose discussions but are largely uncertain how to successfully approach them, often fearing potential backlash for missteps.

This study is based on a content analysis of nearly 200 purpose case submissions to the 2019 PRWeek Purpose Awards. The findings led us to propose a typology of purpose communication, along with best practices for practitioners.

Rather than presenting this as 'definitive research' on the topic, we view our work as a contribution to an ongoing discussion on how to approach what appears to be one of the most critical topic areas at the dawn of the 2020s. Our discussions within the research team, and with many senior practitioners with whom we shared early results, underscored how much perceptions and opinions on brand purpose matter.

In the brand purpose typology, we identified and described different classes of excellence in how organizations tackle tough topics through their purpose campaigns. We want to be clear: with the exception of campaigns that are misleading—which we label disingenuous—we consider all purpose campaigns to be of value to society or the environment, including those that score lower on our typology scale. We're simply proposing strategies for more impactful future campaigns.

Also important to note: purpose and profit are not at odds but should be synergetic. Purpose work needs to map corporate performance goals, and companies that approach purpose genuinely tend to have better business outcomes. This assertion is supported by numerous studies, as detailed in McKinsey's *Profits with Purpose* article (McKinsey, 2014).

The gold standard proposed here, which we've called "purpose-led campaigns," refers to brands that link themselves directly and long-term to a particular cause. These campaigns center on authenticity and long-term commitment.

The report concludes with proposed best practices, as a how-to guide for purpose communication. We view this list of practices—like all findings in this report—as a starting point for a conversation involving practitioners, academics, students and consumers.

Los Angeles, October 2020

Burghardt Tenderich

## INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH GOALS

In today's ever-changing consumer landscape, it is imperative that modern practitioners understand how their company, brands or clients can best genuinely engage with topics of social value and importance. Authentic engagement in social and environmental good is not only just the right ethical behavior, but it is also increasingly becoming a key factor for business performance. Now more than ever, younger consumers demand that the companies they buy from and work for take a stance on issues important to their generation, as evidenced by a variety of recent research reports.

According to *The Purpose Pulse 2020*, "millennials and Generation Z expect companies to take clear positions on social and environmental issues. Six in ten (61%) respondents told us that it was important or very important that companies take a stance on issues that matter to them. A majority (55%) of those surveyed also said that having a clear purpose beyond profit was important to them when considering which brands to buy." (The Brand & Reputation Collective, 2020)

This perspective is evident in global consumer habits. According to the *2018 Edelman Earned Brand study*, "1 in 2 people are belief-driven buyers. They choose, switch, avoid or boycott a brand based on its stand on societal issues. Of belief-driven buyers, 67% bought a brand for the first time because of its position on a controversial issue. 65% will not buy a brand because it stayed silent on an issue it had an obligation to address." (Edelman, 2018)

Therefore, in order to stay relevant in a time when consumers are voting for change with their wallets, organizations must master the art of the authentic, purpose-driven campaign, focused on promoting social or environmental good. But the question plaguing many executives and communicators is how to do just that. Taking sides on controversial societal issues bears significant risks for brands, as demonstrated by Nike's 2018 Colin Kaepernick campaign. Although the ad was awarded Outstanding Commercial at the Creative Arts Emmys and the Grand Prix at Cannes Lions for Entertainment, it was initially met with heavy controversy and backlash, as "conservatives lambasted the company and filled social media with anti-Nike hashtags" (Draper & Creswell, 2019).

These instances of businesses taking a stand raise a question: What is the recipe for ethical and successful brand purpose campaigns, and what is a non-starter?

There are fundamentally different ways that organizations currently approach purpose campaigns, which range from companies being in business for purpose—Patagonia's "We're in business to save our home planet" (Patagonia, 2018)—to companies rooting purpose into its brand—such as Always' *Like a Girl* campaign. Authenticity and achieving genuine benefits for the chosen cause are central to gold-standard purpose communication efforts, and economic benefits for the corporations are strongly desired.

Other organizations seemingly take an ad-hoc approach of conducting and promoting purpose events when it benefits the brand. While any purpose-driven activity is laudable, it can be argued that deeper and ongoing engagement yields the best purpose results and benefits the brand most. Campaigns can only be genuinely purpose-driven if the goal is something more than an increase in sales or to mitigate reputational damage.

While some business thinkers and practitioners define purpose as the reason why a company exists, others view it as the contributions that corporations make to society. An example of the former would be Google's mission statement: "Our mission is to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful" (Google, 2020). While this is true, one could also argue that the actual reason why Google organizes information

and makes it available is to disrupt advertising as the world knew it to become one of the world's most profitable corporations.

Responding to the growing number of brand purpose campaigns, PRWeek launched the Purpose Awards in 2019 “to recognize activations that use creative ideas to genuinely further positive causes and also acknowledge the organizations and individuals behind them” (Barrett, 2019). The award competition created a rich body of case studies, which provided the data for this study as it explored motivations and best practices in purpose campaigns. The research for this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement. At the time of our research, brands were searching for guidance on how to best address social issues and execute authentic brand purpose communication more than they ever had previously. Conducted by the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations in cooperation with PRWeek, this study aims to offer insights for practitioners in these areas:

1. Categorize predominant purpose topics: what are the types of topics that organizations choose, and what is the prevalence? (e.g. immigration, gender issues, global warming)
2. Propose a typology for purpose-driven campaigns: offer insights into the authenticity of purpose as a motivator for a given campaign
3. Identify emerging best practices, along with how not to approach purpose communication

## METHODOLOGY

### THE DATA

This study is based on a qualitative thematic analysis that was conducted in January through April, 2020. PRWeek granted access to 299 case studies that companies and nonprofits had submitted for the 2019 Purpose Awards.

PRWeek divided the awards into categories to which organizations and agencies could submit, and this research study is based on entries in these award categories: Best Advocacy, Best Collaboration, Best Environmental, Best Equity and Inclusion, Best Fundraising, Best Health, Best Integration Into Culture, Best Proof of Authenticity, Best Public Awareness, Best Use of Celebrities/Influencers, Best Use of Digital/Social Media, Best Use of Creativity, Best Use of Measurement and Best Use of Technology.

Only campaigns and activations were considered; campaigns promoting executives, agencies or brands were omitted, bringing the number of cases that were coded and analyzed down to 183.

### CODING

The qualitative analysis was based on Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework for doing a thematic analysis. Once the team became familiar with the data, initial codes were generated and themes were searched for, reviewed and then defined. Finally, findings from the codes were written up (V. Braun, 2006).

In addition to coding for specific criteria, each organization's purpose statement and the specific campaign objectives were made special note of. Both the objective and the purpose statement were assessed in a separate category. For example, a generic, vague purpose statement was assessed as weak, and an objective that did not relate to the campaign was assessed as not relevant.

The coding sheet had a special section for field notes in which campaigns were assessed based on purpose and authenticity through various types: Purpose-Led, CSR-Centric, Branding Motivated, Opportunistic, Commercially Motivated and Disingenuous. Each of these categories is described and expanded upon in the findings section. Some campaigns fit the descriptions for more than one type and were labeled as such.

Although assigned entries were individually coded, each code was reviewed again by a second reviewer to ensure consistency across coding and minimize bias affecting the analysis.

## QUANTITATIVE & QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

After the data was coded, the research team revisited the codes to produce a set of qualitative insights based on the patterns found. Insights based on the above-mentioned goals were drafted, which helped focus the analyses on exploring definitions of purpose, grouping the campaigns into six distinct typologies, categorizing the predominant causes addressed in the campaigns, identifying best and worst approaches and exploring the authenticity of purpose.

Strong vs. weak purpose statements were explored and defined. Similarly, differences between campaigns that fell into the three respective categories of brand fit (high, mid and low) were noted.

Although data from both for-profit and nonprofit organizations were taken into account, distinctions and contrasting findings between the two were provided when appropriate. Quantitative findings were provided when they could supplement the qualitative insights.

## CONTEMPORARY CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF BRAND PURPOSE

A review of contemporary business, corporate and scholarly literature about purpose strategy yields widely different understandings, which can be categorized into these three approaches:

- Purpose as an expression of a company's core value proposition
- Corporate Social Responsibility
- Brand purpose activism

### PURPOSE AS AN EXPRESSION OF A COMPANY'S CORE VALUE PROPOSITION

Several articles recently published in Harvard Business Review (HBR) define purpose as the reason why a company exists and expresses its core value proposition. For example, the purpose of SpaceX is making space radically more accessible. The same article states that most "companies have articulated their purpose—the reason they exist. But very few have made that purpose a reality for their organizations" (Chevreaux, Lopez, & Mesnard, 2017).

Accenture Strategy's 2018 *To Affinity and Beyond* report also defines purpose for companies as "the foundation of every experience" and "the underlying essence that makes a brand relevant and necessary." The implementation of a clear purpose can help organizations "drive competitive agility." Accenture notes that companies that define purpose thoughtfully become a "living business—one that can sustain growth through

hyper-relevance” while addressing customer needs (Accenture, 2018). A clear purpose allows the business to stand out among competitors and in the face of consumers.

McKinsey Quarterly recently referred to purpose as a company’s core reason for being and how it can have a unique and positive impact on society. “[When] companies fully leverage their scale to benefit society, the impact can be extraordinary. The power of purpose is evident as the world fights the urgent threat of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a number of companies doubling down on their purpose, at the very time stakeholders need it the most” (McKinsey, 2020). The article continues: “Purpose defines our core reason for being and the positive impact we have on the world. It shapes our strategy, inspires our people, engages our customers and community, steers choices at moments of truth, and is fully embedded in our culture” (McKinsey, 2020).

Authors of another HBR article take the same approach to purpose but focus on internal implications: “A higher purpose is not about economic exchanges. It reflects something more aspirational. It explains how the people involved with an organization are making a difference, gives them a sense of meaning and draws their support.” The authors link this approach to motivating a company’s work force to improve organizational efficiency. In reference to a struggling energy company they state: “Employees couldn’t seem to break free of old, tired behaviors. They weren’t bringing their smarts and creativity to their jobs” (Quinn & Thakor, 2018). This employee-focused approach utilizes purpose to enhance the organization’s business.

Citing the purpose statements of two pet food companies—“Better with pets” (Purina) and “A better world for pets” (Mars Petcare)—another article states: “A purpose-driven strategy also helps companies overcome the challenges of slowing growth and declining profits. It also mitigates challenges that may arise with the soft side of management: the people-related aspect of running a business, which so often prove to be the undoing of leaders” (Malnight, Buche, & Dhanaraj, 2019).

Other articles emphasize the importance of infusing the stated purpose through every part of the organization, with one noting that even though an overarching purpose can be “costly” to implement, it can lead to greater returns and please investors long-term. Purpose strategy is inherently linked to appealing not just consumers or employees, but also investors and external stakeholders. “Purpose-driven companies outperform over the long-term,” but in order for an organization to reap the benefits and increased value from adopting an overarching purpose, it cannot simply be a “cheesy” statement (Serafeim, 2018). An organization’s purpose should be dynamic, and business leaders should let that guide their decision-making so that it becomes “interwoven into the fabric of the company” (Boncheck & France, 2018). Furthermore, Edelman’s *Earned Brand: Brands Take a Stand* report highlights how an organization’s purpose should be a “proactive effort to define itself” and should be lived out by the organization every day (Edelman, 2018).

## CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

CSR has received much attention from scholars and business thinkers for decades. In the 1990s, John Elkington introduced the Triple Bottom Line, a three-part framework that establishes corporate responsibility in financial, social and environmental terms. It has been widely adopted to evaluate corporate performance in a broader perspective to create greater business value (Elkington, 1999). This concept has arguably become more important in recent years as multiple studies have demonstrated that, as previously stated, younger consumers tie their purchasing decisions to social and environmental values expressed by brands.

According to one study, millennials prefer to purchase a product with a social or environmental benefit (87% vs. 83% U.S. average) or tell friends and family about CSR efforts (82% vs. 72% U.S. average). They are also likely to voice opinions to a company about its CSR efforts (70% vs. 60% U.S. average) (Cone Communications, 2015).

Corporations take notice. “CSR is our only strategy,” a senior executive is quoted in a presentation to Gen Z. The corresponding article posits: “This simple statement redefines the ultimate meaning of CSR: there is no other option. We no longer talk about a satellite strategy for certain stakeholders [...]. There is no longer a specific activity that oscillates between greenwashing and crisis communication. The only option for companies today is to ensure that their competitive strategy is simultaneously an expression of their CSR” (Costa, 2019).

CSR, in that sense, can also be defined as “corporate strategic responsibility,” an “element of corporate global business strategies.” According to an article in the *Journal of Banking and Finance*, the two main reasons why companies tend to engage in CSR initiatives are stakeholder maximization and enhanced financial performance (Jha & Cox, 2015). CSR is also being adopted on a more widespread level, largely because consumers are becoming “more demanding and more informed” (Isaksson, Kiessling, & Harvey, 2014), and these new market pressures and the expectations of consumers have transformed the nature of CSR into more of an imperative.

In August 2019, *Fortune* devoted a cover story to the Business Roundtable’s decision to redefine its mission given the mounting pressure by mostly younger demographics who no longer support the current form of American capitalism. For more than two decades, this group of influential business leaders had put shareholders first, but in August 2019, the group called for a new corporate purpose that leads with investing in employees, fostering diversity and inclusion, dealing fairly and ethically with suppliers, supporting the communities in which they work, and protecting the environment (Murray, 2019).

This follows a thought expressed by Battilana et al. in the spring of 2019: “Corporations are being pushed to change—to dial down their single-minded pursuit of financial gain and pay closer attention to their impact on employees, customers, communities and the environment. Corporate social responsibility from the sidelines is no longer enough, and the pressure comes from various directions: rising and untenable levels of inequality, increasing evidence that the effects of climate change will be devastating, investors’ realization that short-term profitability and long-term sustainability are sometimes in conflict. For reasons like these, a growing number of business leaders now understand that they must embrace both financial and social goals” (Battilana, Pache, Sengul, & Kimsey, 2019).

Along the same lines, former PepsiCo CEO Indra K. Nooyi writes about how she implemented an approach she labeled Performance with Purpose (PwP): “I wanted PepsiCo’s contribution to society to be rooted in its core business model. I did not want us to fund charitable programs to make ourselves feel or look good. Our social responsibility had to evolve away from corporate philanthropy and toward a deep sense of purpose that would also drive shareholder value. We needed to change the way we made money—not just give away some of the money we earned” (Nooyi & Govindarajan, 2020).

Although CSR may have an underlying motivation derived from marketing or desire to gain a competitive advantage, it can also be driven by high social capital, as it inculcates civic duties and altruism (Jha & Cox, 2015). Corporate social responsibility requires organizations to more proactively implement measures and actions. The “traditional set-up” of a CSR program entails a corporation contributing some set of resources for a social impact outside the normal scope of the company (Isaksson, Kiessling, & Harvey, 2014), which indicates that the company, to some extent, must go beyond their typical operations to truly embrace CSR.

## BRAND PURPOSE ACTIVISM

The third approach to purpose is more in line with corporate activism, which goes beyond “cause marketing” and is best exemplified when a company’s stance or actions positively impact society or legislation. According to Best Media Info, “brands today have to stand for something” and that purpose has to be “the brand’s core and not



just a part of its communication.” Brooke Bond Red Label, one of India’s largest tea brands and a brand under Unilever, resonates with customers because “inclusiveness is at the heart” of the brand’s purpose; the brand questions some “deep-rooted prejudices” to advocate for “a more inclusive society” (Nair, 2018). Even if diversity and inclusion may not be directly related to Brooke Bond Red Label’s product, the brand’s longstanding track record in diversity and inclusion helps make the stance authentic and allows for brand to connect with consumers on a more personal level.

Similarly, Inc. defines purpose as “a principle greater than the bottom line” and a way for companies “to make a mark.” In order for a company to be truly purposeful, the article asserts that the purpose must tackle a global problem and adhere to human value. Additionally, companies shouldn’t be afraid to “reinvent” themselves and take a firm stance on an issue or cause, even if it may be controversial. For example, Dick’s Sporting Goods took a political and cultural stance on gun control that the brand felt was right, even though it “knew it would lead to boycotts and viral videos...and angry customers on the other side of the issue.” Patagonia, “no wilting daisy when it comes to corporate activism,” goes so far as to endorse political candidates and “pushes the boundaries further when its purpose warrants it” (Painter, 2018).

Cone Consulting views purpose as powerful in today’s competitive marketplace, along with quality products or services and outstanding customer service: “Purpose is far more nuanced and comprehensive than the cause marketing and corporate citizenship efforts of the past. Once a marketing practice to support worthy causes and boost reputation, purpose is now embraced as a mission-critical growth strategy. When implemented authentically, it can drive significant business results and positively impact society.” The report defines purpose as “a company’s reason for being beyond profits that guides its business growth and impact on society” (Carol Cone on Purpose, 2020).

Fast Company chronicles a story from a food manufacturer that was dropped by Target because the brand “didn’t stand for anything.” Instead of looking at product quality, “the verdict hinged on social impact.” Other examples of truly purpose-driven activations are Patagonia donating \$10 million of its federal tax savings to environmental groups and Ikea hiring refugees at its Jordan facility, which demonstrate devotion to helping people during crises (Paynter, 2018). For organizations to adopt brand purpose activism, they must go beyond asserting a reason for existing or a short-term commitment; their purpose should encompass tangible action that will lead to long-term impact, whether or not it is related to the brand’s products or business goals.

An article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review notes that in order to implement a deeper purpose, companies should involve their employees in their corporate activism. Internal activists, as “social intrapreneurs,” can play substantial roles in formulating purpose as they may be “more in touch” with social issues than top executives are. If organizations create environments “conducive to grassroots social innovation,” intrapreneurs can lead change “by aligning their social and environmental cause with the company’s core business objectives.” Employees can be a powerful tool in bridging between the external community to the organization’s strategy, structure and culture, and smart companies will enable their employees to “help guide them on important social issues” (Davis & White, 2015).

Similarly, *Purpose-driven Organizations: Management Ideas for a Better World* explores the benefits of internally driven purpose. The book suggests organizations should guide employees to explore and discover their own values and to build the overarching purpose that is based on the workforce’s individual motivations. Purpose shouldn’t be imposed on the employees; it should embody an internal synergy while contributing value externally. Asking questions like “What does the company stand for?” and “How would society be worse off or different without the company?” can help organizations and its employees gauge how they can make meaningful impact (Rey, Sotok, & Prat, 2019).

Even with these three distinct approaches to purpose, there are overlaps and intersections between these ideas, and they may not always be adopted exclusively. For example, Forbes reported on the housing start-up New Story, which is utilizing its 3-D printing technology to tackle the global housing crisis. The company is pioneering solutions to mitigate homelessness through its technology and is “building a next-generation social impact organization.” The founder of New Story, Brett Hagler, explains how his company is working to “democratize and open source” its tech, instead of keeping it to themselves. He believes it can impact more people if other entities and partners are using it to solve social problems (Aziz, 2019). For organizations like New Story, their business goals, mission statement, CSR initiatives and corporate activism can blend together, and these notions of purpose can merge in valuable ways.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS

There are three main approaches to purpose strategy, according to literature on the topic:

- **Purpose as an expression of a company’s core value proposition**, viewing purpose strategy as rooted in a company’s reason for existing, often guiding operations throughout all aspects of the company and helping the organization overcome obstacles guided by purpose statements.
- **Corporate Social Responsibility**, viewing purpose strategy as a company’s pursuit of both social and financial goals, and reaching outside of typical operations to create positive social change.
- **Brand purpose activism**, viewing purpose strategy as a company’s stance on social issues and actions to positively change legislation or society.

## FINDINGS

This section presents findings of this study grouped into four sub-topics: a) cause categories—what are the types of topics that organizations choose, and what is the prevalence?, b) purpose statements—a verbalization of an organization’s chosen purpose area, c) brand fit—a measure of how closely a chosen cause is related to the core business of the organization and d) brand purpose typology—insights into the authenticity of purpose as a motivator for a given campaign.

## CAUSE CATEGORIES

The 183 campaign cases considered for this study fell into five different types of cause categories:

1. Social causes—79 cases
2. Health causes—43 cases
3. Economic causes—32 cases
4. Environmental causes—21 cases
5. Political/policy causes—13 cases

Three cases did not support a specific cause. Although there were 183 total cases that were coded, some campaigns tackled more than one cause and were put into more than one category.

Under the social cause category, prominent causes included diversity and inclusion, gender equality and LGBTQ advocacy. Diversity and inclusion, in particular, seemed like a highly applicable social cause that almost every organization could adopt, regardless of brand fit. Youth empowerment also received attention from various

organizations. For example, technology giant Samsung engaged students in STEM learning activities outside of the classroom and prompted them to address real-world issues in their local communities. Some organizations, mostly nonprofits, focused on social issues like homelessness or animal welfare. People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)'s campaigns aimed to raise awareness of the cruel living conditions experienced by huskies, sheep and bears.

Health causes encompassed 11 distinct topics, including medical conditions such as cancer and rare diseases, mental health, disabilities and senior care. The majority of health campaigns were led by nonprofits, although some for-profit organizations took on health issues if they operated in the health sector. Pharmacy company Walgreens' Feel More Like You Oncology/Beauty National Launch supported women in the fight of their life by providing the reassurance they needed to battle beautifully and confidently.

Economic causes were the third most popular cause category. Banks, financial institutions and insurance companies embarked on initiatives regarding financial health and personal finance, which aligned closely with their brands. Among the 33 economic campaigns, five touched on workforce, welfare and corporate culture. Four campaigns focused on poverty; one was on child poverty while the other three centered on an arising issue—period poverty—faced by women around the world. Three campaigns highlighting period poverty were conducted by feminine care brands. A few campaigns focused on tourism and city development.

Despite the global concern about the climate crisis, a surprisingly low number of organizations addressed environmental causes. Most of these programs were awareness or action-driven and organized by nonprofits, although a few were initiated by for-profit companies. For example, National Geographic critically addressed single-use plastic consumption. Some environmental campaigns advocated for awareness of causes that weren't familiar to the public. For example, non-profit Rails to Trails Conservancy dedicated a campaign to raise awareness among future generations of trail users and advocates.

Prominent political and policy causes include immigration, gun violence, reproductive rights and human trafficking. Similar to health-related causes, they were mostly conducted by nonprofits. Only two organizations focused on immigration. Nonprofit organization Welcoming America partnered with TBD Advertising to galvanize engagement and conversations around the experience of immigrants in the U.S.

If a for-profit company advocated for a political cause seemingly unrelated to its business, it might have been because the topic had become embedded in the company's purpose and brand. For example, part of the clothing company Levi Strauss & Co.'s purpose is to support the fight against gun violence in America. In its Gun Violence Prevention campaign, Levi Strauss & Co. supported and amplified efforts of community groups across the country that work to prevent gun violence.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **The social cause category is the most addressed by organizations**, including prominent causes of diversity and inclusion, gender equality and LGBTQ advocacy.
- **Health causes was the second-most popular category**, with a majority of health cause campaigns led by nonprofits.
- **A surprisingly low number of organizations addressed environmental causes**, despite the global concern about the climate crisis.
- **Political and policy causes were the least-addressed**, and a majority of political and policy cause campaigns were also led by nonprofits.

## PURPOSE STATEMENTS

Purpose statements are an important, guiding component to many businesses in their CSR or activism efforts. To assess the connection between brands and campaigns, purpose statements need to be specific to the overall organization and should be reflected in the organization's campaigns. It's important for there to be an evident link between the organization's purpose and the campaign objectives for the campaign to be perceived as authentic.

However, not every organization connected their purpose statement to their campaigns, which made it challenging to connect the campaign to the overall organization's mission. The coding revealed that 65 out of 183 corporations/nonprofits did not list or mention a purpose statement in their entry data. Of the ones that did not have a purpose statement listed, 10 were nonprofit organizations. Among those who mentioned a purpose statement, 43 were categorized as having a strong purpose statement, 38 as mid (meaning their purpose statement was more like a mission statement or a little too broad), and 37 as low or weak.

The first and foremost criteria to evaluate a purpose statement is to see if it is clearly stated and specific enough that it cannot be applied to another industry. Many mid and weak statements were too broad and could be applied to many different industries.

From the strong statements, 22 were those of nonprofit organizations, a little more than half. Two of the leading characteristics of strong statements were having specific goals and identifying target audiences. Generally, nonprofits listed clear and strong purpose statements. However, many for-profit companies also produced solid purpose statements that touched on causes beyond their business operations. Many of the strong statements from for-profit organizations went beyond what would typically be expected, although they encapsulated their brand and business. Strong purpose statements also did not seem to point to any financial benefits for the organization.

While purpose statements relate to some aspect of an organization's business, such statements also touch on a cause beyond business operations. Good statements include language about serving other people, the planet, society, those in need, etc. For example, PayPal's purpose statement is to "democratize financial services and improve the financial health of businesses and individuals around the world," which is specific enough and includes language aimed at helping others. It is related to the industry but goes beyond what would typically be expected of the organization. Nonprofit activist organization March For Our Lives' purpose statement is to "build a nationwide youth movement that would keep supporters passionately engaged and force lawmakers to take action," which is a specific action-oriented mission that mentions its audience.

An organization should have a solid purpose statement that acts as a guide to choosing campaigns, not as a piece the brand develops as part of the campaign. Under Armour entered three different categories with three separate campaigns and included three different organization purpose statements as a part of its entries. The first entry did not tie back to an overall purpose statement; the second stated the purpose as "to highlight the unique power of sport to bring people together;" and the third stated that "Under Armour is a proud advocate for equality, justice and opportunity for all" as the overall organization purpose. This type of variation in purpose statements is indicative of altering the brand's mission to support whichever campaign is active at the moment. It would be best for an organization to have one overall purpose statement that can be linked to all campaigns.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- An organization's purpose statement should guide purpose campaign choices.
- Thus, purpose-led campaigns should have a connection to the purpose statement, in order to easily connect the campaign to the company's mission.
- Effective purpose statements are clearly stated and specific so that they cannot easily be applied to another industry.
- Successful purpose statements should also touch on serving others outside of regular business practice.

## BRAND FIT

Brand fit is the extent to which the campaign's cause aligns with the organization's core business. For example, a farming company embarking on a campaign on sustainable agriculture would embody a high brand fit, while a tech company tackling reproductive rights would be labeled as a low brand fit. The research team theorized that a high brand fit would likely be beneficial in enhancing the authentic nature of the campaigns, while a low brand fit would be less genuine due to an organization's lack of expertise about the cause.

Brand fit of the specific campaigns were categorized into three groups: high, mid and low, based on how appropriate or related a campaign was to the company/organization and its ethos. The vast majority (68%) showed a high brand fit, 21% showed a medium and only 11% a low brand fit. However, a high brand fit did not imply a strong purpose or authenticity and was purely an indicator of appropriateness.

### High Brand Fit

Most campaigns demonstrated a high brand fit. For those campaigns, the cause was directly related to the company's core business. Blue Shield of California initiated the Return to Paradise campaign, which collaborated with physicians to solve an enormous healthcare challenge caused by wildfires in 2019. Most high brand fit campaigns had objectives that could often be traced back to the brand's overall stated purpose, such as the Retail Revival campaign initiated by eBay. As an ecommerce platform, it helped small businesses grow by providing training. The campaign objective, "to empower local businesses to compete on a global scale and thrive in today's economy," speaks to the brand's overall purpose statement, "to connect people and create economic opportunity to all."

If the cause seems irrelevant to a company's business, having a legacy revolving around the cause could serve as evidence of high brand fit. Pizza Hut has aimed to tackle childhood illiteracy in its long-term campaign. Although childhood literacy seems unconnected to Pizza Hut's food business, the company had a longstanding legacy of enhancing childhood literacy.

When choosing a cause with a high brand fit close to its core business, the company needs to avoid the perception of it being self-serving. This could be the case if the campaign primarily contributes to revenue growth. Additionally, campaigns based on causes that are too broad may be seen as "hopping on the bandwagon." If a brand chooses to engage in a cause just because it seems like people are actively talking about it at one point in time, that could come off as the brand's inauthentic efforts to assert its relevance for the sake of the publicity or marketing benefits.

Some organizations selected a specific facet of a more well-known cause and avoided basing their campaign on a very broad hot topic. For example, the American Heart Association's Hands-Only CPR campaign focused on the broad issue of educating the public about CPR. It also implemented a smaller, more local approach on providing bilingual resources to low-income communities, which can come across as more authentic or genuine. The organization chose a specific, less-known cause within a widely known issue. Brand fit aside, the breadth of the cause is an equally important facet to consider.

#### Mid Brand Fit

For a mid brand fit, the cause had some connections with the brand. For example, the spirit brand Cruzan Rum established a natural disaster fund for islands across the U.S. and U.S. Virgin Islands. A small connection between the brand and the cause is evident, as the brand itself originated from an island. In some mid brand fit cases, the organization had demonstrated past links to the cause. For example, PepsiCo.'s Closing the Crop Gap campaign highlighted the challenges women in agriculture face on a global level. Although agriculture may not be directly related to Pepsi's public brand image or what consumers typically associate with Pepsi, its subsidiary Frito-Lay does rely on agriculture. Additionally, the brand had engaged in numerous other campaigns aimed at developing more sustainable and equitable food systems. Even though consumers may not see the immediate connection between Pepsi and agriculture, the brand's past initiatives and subsidiary's operations give the campaign a sense of legitimacy.

#### Low Brand Fit

For a low brand fit, the cause was not related to the company's industry or could be applied to every industry. For example, Hershey ran a campaign meant to inspire youth to talk more about loneliness and social isolation. This campaign was in no way related to Hershey as a chocolate brand, as social isolation is a cause that could be applied to basically any industry.

Tackling an issue with low brand fit without a long-term commitment to the cause can be perceived as less authentic. According to the award entry, the Hershey's Makers of Good Teen Summit was a one-time event designed to "make a positive difference with Gen Z in tackling social isolation and loneliness." This topic seemed random, as the company had no previous commitment to uplifting Generation Z.

BBVA's The Sense of Cocoa campaign was also random with no brand fit, as BBVA is a banking company and the campaign responded to issues of taste disorders. Another example is Lean Cuisine's ItAll Social Experiment. This campaign focused on women's empowerment, which is quite broad and does not necessarily have a connection to the brand or its products. Lean Cuisine also did not offer an organization purpose statement that backs up its campaign, which made it difficult to connect the cause to the brand.

### KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **High brand fit** campaigns can be effective when the company avoids the perception of the cause choice being self-serving. Often, campaign authenticity is questioned when the cause relates directly to revenue growth. Finding a niche area of a high brand fit topic is a good solution.
- **Mid brand fit** campaigns can be effective when a brand has a history of similar initiatives that gives the new campaign a sense of belonging.
- **Low brand fit** campaigns can be successful when there is a long-term company commitment to a cause, but otherwise are often perceived as inauthentic.

## BRAND PURPOSE TYPOLOGY

The case analysis yielded a typology of brand purpose based on the apparent motivation behind the campaign as a measure of authenticity and genuineness. As stated before, any purpose effort that is not misleading or does not make false claims makes a positive difference and should be encouraged. Along the same lines, companies should achieve financial benefits from purpose work, but the following is worth considering: are companies reaping commercial benefits—such as increased revenue—because they successfully link their products or services to a particular purpose activation? Or, are commercial benefits derived from stakeholders' appreciation of the long-term and deep investment in a given cause, with no consideration for short-term branding or revenue benefits? This report proposes that the latter is more authentic and genuine.

The following purpose typology might help communicators realize where their campaigns rank and may motivate brands to move their campaigns up the purpose scale. The typology categories were defined as follows:

**Purpose-Led**—Brands that link themselves directly and long-term to a particular cause, making this cause more central to the organization's mission than CSR campaigns. It is considered the most authentic and genuine approach.

**CSR-Centric**—Brands that choose a cause that in most cases somehow relates to the company or its brand(s) and turn this topic into a long-term campaign with broad organizational support.

**Branding Motivated**—Brands that closely align with a particular purpose. If done genuinely, the brand will benefit while making a positive contribution to change.

**Opportunistic**—Brands execute a purpose-themed campaign as the opportunity arises. These initiatives tend to be short in duration and limited in impact. They have the potential to become more impactful if brands evolve the program by making a deeper and long-term commitment to the cause.

**Commercially Motivated**—Initiatives where commercial benefits appear to be the primary motivation rather than the cause itself. Cases in this category tend to prioritize awareness for a given cause and stop short of action. Their KPIs focus on market visibility over actual change.

**Disingenuous**—Campaigns that knowingly make false or misleading purpose claims to promote the brand with no positive impact on causes. Practitioners should stay away from disingenuous activations.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS

As indicated in the graph below, these categories fall into a continuum of increasing authenticity and genuineness. Brands should simply refrain from executing campaigns that fall into the categories of Disingenuous. They should be honest to themselves when conducting Commercially Motivated or Opportunistic campaigns and should develop strategies for moving their purpose work higher in the typology. Purpose-Led and CSR-Centric campaigns are considered genuine and motivated by making a positive impact on society.



Source: USC Center for Public Relations

A quantitative analysis mapping the campaigns to a brand purpose category demonstrates that genuine categories show the highest frequencies for both for-profit corporations and nonprofit organizations. (A few campaigns fit into more than one category, i.e., a campaign could fall into both Opportunistic and Commercially Motivated categories). Commercial gain as the primary motivation is prevalent, and disingenuous campaigns exist, but luckily only in a small number of cases.

Purpose Typology	Purpose-Led	CSR-Centric	Branding Motivated	Opportunistic	Commercially Motivated	Disingenuous
Total # of campaigns	49	42	42	21	36	4
# of for-profits	23	31	33	17	35	4
# of nonprofits	26	11	9	4	1	0

### Purpose-Led

Most encouragingly, the category with the highest number of cases—40 or about 25%—was the Purpose-Led category. It's worth noting that 23 campaigns were by for-profit corporations while exactly half of all (26 of 52) entries by nonprofits were Purpose-Led. Purpose-Led campaigns demonstrated the utmost authentic and rooted commitment to tackling a cause, in which the organization's sole or primary motivations were to contribute to the cause.

Purpose-Led campaigns were often expressed as an extension of the brand or organization, with a close alignment to the brand's purpose statement. This was especially true for nonprofits, but even among for-profit organizations, many had valuable partnerships with nonprofits or community groups. For example, Benefit's Bold is Beautiful Project has been going on for five years and collaborates with charities worldwide to help improve the lives of women and girls in local communities. Benefit donated all of the brand's product revenue to charities.



Under Armour's Building Bridges Through Basketball campaign encompassed a partnership with Ross Initiative in Sports for Equality (RISE) to provide community-based activities and training focused on diversity and conflict resolution.

Most importantly, Purpose-Led campaigns typically did not provide the organization with any short-term benefits. Gender Avengers, a nonprofit, engages in activities that served a clear purpose of fixing the recognized and rampant gender disparity in the professional world. There is no marketing or branding component to its work, and all activations lead back to the cause, demonstrating Gender Avenger's true devotion to gender equality.

With regard to campaign mechanics—the strategies and tactics implemented in each campaign—Purpose-Led campaigns encompassed actionable initiatives that went beyond awareness. For example, nonprofit DCI Donor Services' Be the Gift campaign centered on a specific action—getting people to sign up to be organ donors. Campaigns like these also featured educational components meant to benefit their audiences. The CDC and NCRID's How Vaccines Work campaign was aimed at educating parents on vaccines and their benefits. It was intended to counter misinformation, and the efforts prioritized the dissemination of information and education over awareness of the brand or organization. At times, large organizations were able to launch large-scale projects that addressed well-identified big problems, like IBM's Code and Respond campaign, featuring “the world's largest hackathon to inspire developers worldwide to build breakthrough solutions on how to better plan for and respond to the wrath of Mother Nature.”

Purpose-Led campaigns often had a regional focus. Some were solely local efforts without any broad, national component. For example, DC Health's Sex Is... Campaign focused specifically on the local DC community and providing educational resources that fit the needs of that community. The time horizon for truly Purpose-Led campaigns tended to be long-term or ongoing; they often demonstrated an historic commitment to the cause, such as Pizza Hut's Childhood Literacy campaign, which was based heavily on the organization's legacy.

In a few instances, Purpose-Led campaigns did not have a high brand fit. However, even without a close fit, there was a clear, authentic motivation that was driven by something personal. Levi Strauss' Gun Violence Prevention activations related back to a specific crisis—a accidental shooting—that occurred in one of its stores, which made Levi Strauss' involvement legitimate and credible. As a brand that is fundamentally tied to images of American masculinity, this campaign challenged its own long-standing brand image and added some valuable corporate perspective on the national conversation of gun violence. The campaign also holistically captured various aspects of gun violence prevention in ways that resonated with customers by working with community groups and taking legal action. In another example, MOD Pizza's suicide awareness activations came off as purposeful because they were based on a specific customer's story, which demonstrated the company's concern for individual customers. All components were implemented in its shops, which shows the brand's focus on its local efforts. Even if the brand fit may not be high, these campaigns demonstrated that a more personal approach can be authentic and provide immense value.

### CSR-Centric

Out of the 42 in this category (21.6%), 11 were nonprofit campaigns. Most were considered high in authenticity and tackled issues that the organizations seemed to have much knowledge and expertise about. Many of the organizations were already thought leaders and, therefore, there was a natural fit between the cause and the brand. Bethesda's Connect All Abilities was an educational campaign that aimed to raise awareness for those with disabilities. It was focused on spearheading conversations regarding a topic under the organization's specific expertise.

CSR-Centric campaigns made no push for marketing, and if there was an awareness component, they focused solely on awareness for the cause. This was often reflected in their reported KPIs. For example, the Child Mind Institute's MyYoungerSelf campaign was focused on bringing awareness for mental health and breaking down its stigma through hashtag activism and storytelling about the cause. No part of the campaign was focused on the brand or its assets.

Many CSR-Centric campaigns also seemed to focus on small-scale or local causes that centered around a specific community's needs. There was no widespread publicity stunt involved. PayPal's Contributing to Financial Health campaign was launched specifically to help furloughed employees during a government shutdown. The brand was taking a stand on a very specific issue and audience that wasn't being properly addressed by the government, and this more targeted approach helped the brand claim authenticity through the campaign.

Although they ranged in their objectives, campaigns that added an additional internal component were often classified as CSR-Centric. An internal, employee-focused component helped to make intentions more genuine. Employees often serve as credible ambassadors for a cause or campaign and can be a valuable bridge between an organization's executives and their external stakeholders. Kaiser Permanente launched a campaign to activate almost its entire workforce in an internal crowdsourcing campaign to identify the most critical health challenges. Covestro's Community Engagement at Robert Morris University campaign also focused on empowering employees through their personal senses of purpose via a series of educational and volunteer programs. These internal components indicate the genuine intentions of this campaign.

### Branding Motivated

Branding Motivated was another prominent category, with 42 campaigns (21.6%) classified as such. Nine of these were campaigns launched by nonprofits. These campaigns typically encompassed those with a high brand fit, and the campaign objective aligned well with the organization's purpose statement. For example, Corteva Agriscience's Farmfluencer campaign aimed to generate interest in farming among Gen Z. The audience was relevant to the specific cause, and this also helped Corteva establish itself as a leader in youth empowerment in the agricultural sector.

However, in some campaigns, the chosen cause was not specific enough. The organization seemed to want to tackle a purposeful issue related to its cause but avoided getting too niche because that could have limited the audience. For example, CCA Global Partners' Design for a Difference campaign centered around using design to promote social good but did not select a single cause; it let the participants choose the cause in their entries. This kept it broad enough to attract a wide array of designers to its campaign and allowed the brand to associate with a broader audience. This lack of specificity could have benefitted the brand in keeping its approach more holistic and neutral, but oftentimes these types of campaigns fail to go beyond the organization's boundaries in meaningful ways.

Aside from the brand image, the Branding Motivated campaigns are often related to the company's historic image, past efforts or core competencies. For example, Ford's Creating Tomorrow Together campaign incorporated the nostalgia and historic aspects of its brand in a locally focused campaign. The brand leveraged its rooted connections in the local automotive industry. Furthermore, Microsoft had a core competency around assisting those with special needs. Its Changing the Game campaign revolved around a newly designed gaming console for children with special needs; the brand's Super Bowl commercial showing children playing with the console promoted its effort.

Campaigns in the Branding Motivated category also strived to set an example for the industry or capture thought leadership over a certain cause. Etsy's Delivering a World of Good campaign uplifted its credibility as an e-commerce brand by implementing sustainable manufacturing and shipping processes, while pushing other brands in the e-commerce space to follow suit. AT&T's 10x Carbon Reduction campaign not only positioned AT&T as a leader in the tech industry, but also showcased its commitment to use technology to reduce carbon footprints. Organizations in this category also desired to build a stronger association of their brand name with a certain cause. Colgate's Save Water campaign initiated a think tank event and many valuable conversations about water conservation to help audiences see Colgate's link to broader water conservation efforts. The brand was not actually doing anything tangible to help conserve water, but the campaign focused more on awareness and brand image.

### Opportunistic

The Opportunistic category consisted of 21 campaigns (10.8%) with four of these being nonprofit activations. Campaigns in this category took note of existing events or situations unrelated to the brand and added their own purpose component to it. Typically, opportunistic campaigns are short in duration and impact and may seem random. While supporting causes in any fashion is meaningful, brands may miss the opportunity to turn these short-term activations into more long-term and impactful campaigns.

Elysian Brewing, a beer company, initiated a campaign that was launched to coincide with Seattle's Pride Month. The #MarryUsJVN campaign had a low brand fit, and the cause was selected more because it corresponded with a local event. Despite its contribution, the campaign felt temporary and short-lived: The #MarryUsJVN campaign leveraged Pride Month to gain awareness, but it did not encompass any ongoing activations that lasted beyond that month. Brands in this category also seemed to use campaigns to tout other "purposeful" facets of the brand that already exist. Philip Morris International launched its Equal Salary campaign, which highlighted the diversity in the organization but had a primary motivation of bringing attention to a diversity award the organization had already won; therefore, it was not a new kind of activation, but more of a publicity campaign to showcase the award.

In some cases, the brand seemed to accidentally become aware of a specific need and took a philanthropic approach to fulfilling it, which it then heavily promoted. For example, Chobani created a campaign after it learned about the school lunch debt of 43 schools in Rhode Island, Idaho and New York. The company paid off the debt, shot a video about it and amplified it to attract "three billion impressions." Therefore, because of the seemingly momentary and short-term nature of this and related campaigns, they are typically both low-risk and low-impact. Helping public schools pay for school lunches is a worthy cause, and Chobani still has the opportunity to turn the school lunch bail-out program into a purpose-led campaign: make it a broader and long-term and emphasize the need for health lunches, which will closely align brand and campaign.

Anheuser Busch's Family Talk About Drinking campaign was the brand's attempt at sparking conversations about teen drinking habits by providing a series of short videos. As an alcohol brand, teen drinking does speak to the essence of the product, but the campaign seemed to lack depth, possibly due to the risky nature of the conversation. The company created a few videos educating parents on teen drinking and promoted it on social media channels. Teen drinking is an issue that parents likely would be interested in learning more about, so although the series made for a helpful educational resource, it was not amplified or substantial enough to make a lasting impact or statement. This was an opportunity for thought leadership when it comes to safe drinking, but that would have required a more holistic implementation.

Many of the Opportunistic campaigns also encapsulated a brand's desire to amplify its reputation or drive business, although that may not be the main or the sole motivation. These campaigns were utilized as tools that also could support a good cause in addition to their marketing benefits. Pharmaceutical company Astellas started a campaign around employee volunteerism, as it claimed that volunteerism would serve as a business driver. However, unlike marketing programs, Astella focused heavily on integration of volunteerism to its company culture, and the company was promoting it externally to gain additional recognition. For some opportunistic campaigns, the brands or organizations may even have engaged in pro bono work with assets that already exist. For example, the student-led organization Pathways 2 Power reached out to LINK Strategic Partners and Ground Media to distribute its PSA about gun control to stakeholders as pro bono work.

In summary, opportunistic campaigns are a good start, but brands shouldn't stop there and instead should make efforts to move the campaign up the typology.

### Commercially Motivated

This category captured 19% of all cases, and only one of the 37 campaigns was a campaign by a nonprofit organization. This indicates that for-profit companies, in comparison to NGOs, may more often try to leverage purpose activations for primarily marketing purposes. Many of these campaigns focused on shorter initiatives rather than ongoing commitments to a cause.

Many organizations seemed to specifically state that their main objective was to gain awareness—rather than make an impact on the chosen cause. In Regenix Hair's Beauty Has No Gender campaign entry, the brand noted that the campaign specifically served as a marketing initiative. Fittingly, many of these brands only reported brand-related KPIs. The Rice Krispies Treats Love Notes initiative "was to make Rice Krispies Treats' write-on wrapper accessible for blind and low-vision children so that more kids could receive love and support with their sweet treat this back-to-school season." Aimed to "win consumers' hearts," the entry exclusively reported marketing and branding KPIs such as brand recall, but not on purpose impact.

Activations that were commercially motivated tended to focus on awareness and typically didn't have much of an action element. For example, shoe company Wolverine launched a Project Bootstrap campaign focused on raising awareness for trade work, specifically among younger audiences. The brand's stated goal of the campaign was to drive relevance among young consumers. These types of campaigns often have objectives that are aimed at reaching more people to ultimately gain new customers. Similarly, Bonobos' EvolveTheDefinition campaign's objective was to redefine masculinity, but in the company's entry, it noted that one of the campaign's primary objectives was "to broaden the homogenous consumer base." Appealing to new consumers was why it wanted to expand the definition of "man." By being more inclusive and evolving the definition of masculinity, Bonobos would be able to appeal to new consumers and speak to a meaningful cause that resonated with the public during the #MeToo era. Although the company's perspective added some publicity to the dialogue, there was a lack of tangible efforts throughout the campaign, as it lacked educational and resource components and focused more heavily on partnerships with athletes and celebrities.

Similarly, many campaigns that fell under the Commercially Motivated category were aimed at gaining a competitive advantage. Oftentimes, they were self-serving and strived to undermine competition. For example, StubHub stated that the main objective of its TicketForward campaign was to showcase the organization's dedication to purpose and outcompete other ticket companies. Some campaigns in this category were constructed specifically to fix or uplift a brand's reputation.

Furthermore, many Commercially Motivated campaigns were implemented by brands that aspired to be prominent CSR brands while capturing thought leadership. For example, Bristol Myers Squibb's Survivorship Today campaign highlighted that the organization wanted to assert its stance as a leader in the health field. Although the original campaign intent was to advance cancer research, the organization was more interested in capturing mindshare, as it stated its main objective was to position itself as a leader in the field. Some campaigns began as a way to promote their business' efforts to "do good," although they failed to showcase support for a clear cause. PopSocket's philanthropic program called Poptivism, stated its goal was to harness the popularity of the brand's products. At the same time, the brand was hoping to do good, so it reported a number of actionable results that contributed to global issues.

In conclusion, campaigns should yield marketing benefits, but in the context of purpose communication, that shouldn't be the primary motivation. Brands should look for ways to make a deeper commitment to the chosen cause.

### Disingenuous

Although only four of the coded campaigns were labeled as Disingenuous (2.1%), it's important to recognize it as a rather extreme typology—lowest in rank when it came to authenticity. Disingenuous was found to be a practice that was implemented only by for-profit organizations.

For campaigns labeled as Disingenuous, the organizations were not implementing anything new and were simply rephrasing business operations in "purposeful" language. It seemed more like an ad for the organization rather than an actual initiative. For example, in CVS Health's Tested to be Trusted initiative, the company implemented enhanced transparency on the labels of vitamins and supplements with rigorous testing of ingredients. The goal of this campaign seemed to be to communicate the company's ethics and morals and help stand out in the face of competitors. However, CVS Health should have been implementing high standards and transparency regardless, and this initiative did not demonstrate anything that went above and beyond its business objectives. In the entry, it seemed the company was simply highlighting new standards that it was adopting and pairing it with promotional language.

Additionally, campaigns that fall under Disingenuous tended to conceal their true intentions. Centria Autism is a for-profit organization that provides therapy to those with autism. The organization's Find Your Potential campaign was geared toward family members and parents, as it provided educational resources and information on its therapy services. The activation did attempt to raise awareness for Autism Spectrum Disorder, but the prominent goal of the campaign was to "highlight the benefits of Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy as the preferred method of autism treatment and establish Centria as the thought leader in ABA therapy." This entry seemed more like an advertising campaign rather than a purposeful one, as it included customer testimonials and provided education and resources in the context of the company's services.

Due to its deceptive nature, brands should refrain from executing and promoting campaigns where purpose is either an afterthought or does not exist.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **Campaign authenticity is absolutely necessary for successful brand purpose efforts.** Authenticity can be analyzed according to the campaign's intent.

- **Purpose-led campaigns are the most authentic.** These campaigns typically have a high brand fit, do not provide the organization with any direct benefits, were carried out through specific actionable initiatives and had a regional focus. Occasionally, successful purpose-led campaigns had a low brand fit in cases where they focused on personal care for the customers.
- **Opportunistic or commercially motivated efforts** may help specific causes, but brands can maximize impact by adding depth and duration.
- **Disingenuous campaigns lack authenticity.** They simply rephrase business operations in “purposeful” language, relating to actions that directly benefit the organization without providing additional value. They have the potential to be misleading and should therefore not exist.

## BEST PRACTICES

The case analysis clearly identified best practices—as well as what not to do—in communicating brand purpose. These are designed to function as guidelines to practitioners for future brand purpose campaigns:

### SELECTING A CAUSE: BRAND FIT

Brand fit is an important facet that organizations should consider when selecting a cause, and there are pros and cons of low, mid and high brand fit. A low brand fit could potentially help an organization broaden its CSR efforts. Additionally, a general cause is still better than no cause at all. Many brands and organizations chose to implement diversity and inclusion campaigns, and although these typically did not have a high brand fit, they were still impactful. However, low brand fit campaigns may not be perceived as authentic because organizations do not possess much expertise on the cause, and it may be difficult for the public to discern why the organization chose it. A mid brand fit may be an indicator of high authenticity, as the topic is not too closely aligned with revenue-generating activities but is still meaningful to the core of the company. However, the connection with the organization may not be clear and it could come off as a marketing ploy to attract new audiences. High brand fit campaigns were generally seen as the most authentic (although this was not always the case). They can align more seamlessly with an organization’s mission, as they are more related to the organization or brand’s regular operations or business. Oftentimes, high brand fit meant the organization had demonstrated an ongoing or historic commitment to the cause, which helped establish authenticity. Yet, high brand fit campaigns could potentially get too close to the brand’s core business and could come off as self-serving.

Brand fit is clearly a complex component of cause selection that cannot be overlooked. Generally, it may be more beneficial for an organization to select a cause that has a mid or high brand fit. The cause should make sense given the context of the organization’s purpose statement, past efforts and expertise, and should not be selected purely for self-serving reasons. Meaningful selection of a cause is an important step in implementing an authentic campaign—it can affect engagement with the campaign and long-lasting perceptions of the organization.

### RESEARCH

Conducting research (particularly primary research) before implementing campaign activities reflects a real commitment to the issue and helps to position an organization as more knowledgeable about the cause or field. Organizations should dedicate a part of their campaign resources to research, so that the data can inform the campaign strategy and provide insight on how to advance specific causes. There are two types of research that

can be conducted for Purpose-Led campaigns. The first is campaign-specific research, which informs the campaign strategy. This type of research may provide information on target audiences and can help optimize the message of the campaign. The audience analysis data may significantly increase the chances to reach the right audience with the right message at the optimal time and place.

The second type of research is thought leadership. This research helps position an organization as more knowledgeable about the cause or the field, and the insights that are drawn can be used as content for the campaign while clarifying specific aspects of the cause that the organization is looking to tackle. For example, Worthy's Building a Financial Fresh Start campaign conducted a large-scale financial study about divorce that provided vital insights to validate the statement that rings are a financial asset. Additionally, Michelin North America's Teens Prove Their #StreetTread campaign included commissioning research among parents and teens about feelings of safety relating to unsafe tires while driving automobiles. Always conducted the sixth iteration of its Confidence and Puberty study to help identify insights and commissioned proprietary research to track how period poverty affects girls in multiple countries, even developed ones. This research helped position Always as a thought leader with the expertise and credibility to tackle its long-term Fight to #EndPeriodPoverty.

Although small or non-profit organizations may not have the resources to conduct corporate or large-scale research, they should do what they can within the constraints of their resources. Even small-scale research, such as speaking to members of the target audience, is commendable and can be beneficial to amplifying the campaign. An increased understanding of the audience can give the organization more insight in tackling certain issues and reaching key populations. For large organizations that possess the resources to conduct thought leadership research, ongoing initiatives can help solidify legitimacy and credibility.

## MESSAGING

A best practice in messaging is for organizations to take an inclusive approach, rather than a competitive one. If a company or brand cares about its chosen cause and is determined to make a difference, it makes sense to share best practices and encourage other companies, even competitors, to join in with the goal to maximize impact.

A positive example of messaging came from PepsiCo's All in One Recycling campaign, which put forward a call to action to all food and beverage companies to join together. PepsiCo's message was that while companies compete on the shelves, they need to join together to create industry-wide change to improve recycling education and infrastructure.

In a similar example, Etsy implemented a collaborative message for its Delivering a World of Good campaign, as part of an effort to go beyond a company-specific initiative to an e-commerce industry-wide one. The brand picked up the tab to offset carbon emissions from shipping for every online shopping purchase in the U.S. for a day—even for its competitors.

It is also vital for brands to avoid positioning something that is a part of its normal business operations as purpose, like CVS Health's entry in which it highlighted its duty to implement rigorous testing of standards for supplements.

## PURPOSE STATEMENTS AND CAMPAIGN OBJECTIVES

Organizations should choose purpose statements that are specific to the overall organization, and make sure the purpose statement is reflected in the organization's campaign. A statement needs to be clear and adequately

specific so that it cannot be applied to another industry. To ensure authenticity, it is a best practice to choose one purpose statement that applies to all campaigns, rather than adjusting the purpose statement to fit a specific campaign.

With regard to campaign objectives, there are a few crucial mistakes to avoid. Campaigns that fail to explicitly communicate a cause or fail to describe an intent of purposefulness without detailing what that purpose means to the brand, reflect insufficient authenticity. Capital One's Purpose Project was a broad campaign aiming to “move beyond products and services to passions and purpose” with no explanation or any real cause. When a brand attempts to cover all of its bases regarding social responsibility with a broad purpose campaign, this can be seen as inauthentic and possibly motivated by a desire to shift brand perception. Such motivations can be seen through objectives like connecting the brand to media and consumers in “an unexpected way” and “collaborat[ing] across the business to develop and test a platform that engages with consumers around a shared purpose.” In another example of language that is too broad, Celebrity Cruise's Celebrity Edge: Sailing Away From the Competition campaign described its purpose as “making the world a better place.”

## LOCALITY AND REACH

Even if selected causes are widespread issues that affect the general public, brands should consider engaging in local and community efforts to show their grassroots efforts in tackling the problem and engaging with those on the ground. For example, Fundación Tropicalia's Soy Niña, Soy Importante activation was a girls' summer camp that focused on women's education through local advocacy and fundraising. It centered specifically on young girls in the Miches community in the Dominican Republic. Although the cause itself was broad, this localized campaign took a large-scale issue and made it relevant to a specific cultural context. The Foundation's regional approach came across as more purposeful, even if it was on a smaller scale.

A campaign should amplify some form of personal sharing that goes beyond the surface level, as this strategy can assist with virality and participation. Several campaigns in the data set encouraged direct participation from the public, oftentimes prompting people to utilize social media to share their stories to spread awareness for the cause on a more personal level. This helped involve the target audience members in the campaign directly, and the word-of-mouth helped the efforts reach new audiences. For example, the Child Mind Institute's MyYoungerSelf campaign prompted its audience members to share their journeys with their mental health struggles. In addition to using an influencer strategy, the organization leveraged the more candid stories of its audiences, who were not paid for their participation, and this helped spark genuine conversations about the cause on social media. This personal approach can amplify the reach and magnitude of campaigns, can push it beyond the original efforts of the organization, and can help eliminate stigma or barriers to awareness.

## PARTNERSHIPS

Collaborations with nonprofits or industry thought leaders can help campaigns come off as more fruitful and authentic, and for-profit companies should consider including these valuable partnerships in their campaigns. Partnerships should consist of action-based activities, such as conducting research studies or fundraising as part of the campaign; connections that fail to include legitimate activities can appear inauthentic. Levi Strauss' Gun Violence Prevention campaign involved multiple partnerships with gun violence prevention organizations that made the brand's effort appear more legitimate, and the campaign strived to get people to donate and take political action. In another example, Always partnered with Feeding America for its #EndPeriodPoverty campaign, maximizing the donation footprint through this partnership.



Incorporating internationally recognized standards positively affects a sense of legitimacy. For example, Covestro's THINC30 campaign was based on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which were heavily incorporated into the objectives. Doing so helped the brand's efforts to appear more tangible and more thoroughly researched, and it demonstrated the organization's true service to others and the planet. Implementation of internationally recognized standards can show that organizations are engaging in the cause for more than their own gain.

Another indicator of best practices is an organization's history of supporting purpose, including implementing activities that support the same mission as the current campaign. Campaigns should consist of multiple activations and other long-term activities to be meaningful, as this can prove commitment to a cause. For example, the Microsoft Airband campaign is a long-term, five-year campaign dedicated to achieving widespread broadband access through public and private partnerships and policy advocacy work. Its long-lasting nature demonstrates an ongoing commitment to the goals. The Estée Lauder Companies' #TimeToEndBreastCancer campaign based itself on a cause that it has worked with since 1992. U-Haul's Humble Design campaign to fight homelessness is ongoing and has been in play since 2009. These examples showcase the organization's true devotion to the cause.

While PR campaigns have seen an increase in partnerships with influencers, such partnerships should make sense. The public should be able to understand why specific influencers were chosen to represent the cause. Selecting a "random" celebrity or public figure may not reflect best practices, and instead reflect a desire to capitalize on one's popularity. Since celebrities and influencers embody their own brands, there should be an adequate or logical match between the figure(s) and the organization. These personalities have brands based on what they stand for, as well as their past and current partnerships, so the principle for ensuring cause and brand fit also applies to choosing influencers and partners.

Teaming up with influencers or celebrities who have no history of advocating for the cause reflects a failure in the depth of the campaign. For example, Stonyfield Organics' #PlayFree campaign utilized actor and parent Adam Scott, who fit the demographic of its target audience, but had no previous connection to advocating for environmental issues. Even if a campaign comes across as authentic, involving someone who doesn't directly align with the campaign cause may decrease that authenticity, all for the sake of publicity and status.

## INTERNAL EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Purpose campaigns should include some sort of component internal to the company's structure and employees, so that there is a connection between how the brand operates and what the brand wants to portray. It gives the aura that the employees also really care about the cause that the organization is tackling. Internal stakeholders and employees should be involved in some way to build the organization's purpose from the ground up. For example, PayPal's Contributing to Financial Health campaign leveraged its employees to spread word of mouth for the cause and to reach more furloughed federal employees whom the drive was meant to assist. This helped to amplify the national campaign through a more personal approach.

## INTERACTIVITY

There should be some interactive component to the campaign that prompts people to take an active part in it, possibly in a creative way. Instead of simply pushing out messaging to audiences, an interactive element can be effective in showing the organization's commitment to not only the cause but to the public's understanding of it. Although awareness is important, as it often has to be the first step before the public can be moved to change

behaviors and perceptions, a key best practice for campaigns is to accompany the awareness portion with meaningful and tangible action on the organization's part. For example, Gender Avenger's ongoing campaign is based on women reporting and sharing their experiences at events and in the workplace. This interactivity helps build a community and network for these women, in which Gender Avenger serves as a valuable and accessible resource. A campaign that raises awareness on a cause is much more impactful and authentic if it is accompanied by meaningful action on the organization's part.

## NEED FOR AUTHENTICITY

Brands and organizations should also be aware of practices that may make their campaign less authentic. Engaging in purpose or Corporate Social Responsibility campaigns to improve brand reputation or as an attempt to recover from a crisis that garnered negative perceptions of a brand can be noted as self-serving. For example, the first Presidential podcast with the Clintons had a main objective to "(1) overcome negative press about the Clinton Foundation" and "(2) to demonstrate how the Foundation continues to improve the lives of millions of people around the world." The campaign was a response to backlash remaining from Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, and the campaign's entry consisted of constant compliments on Clinton's work. While the issues it highlighted were noteworthy, the podcast was rooted in gaining more positive press for the Foundation and the family, which kept the campaign from being truly authentic or purposeful.

## MEASURING SUCCESS

Organizations should be careful in the ways they measure success. KPIs should include cause-related, action-based events rather than just media reach. A certain number of social media impressions will not provide value to a cause unless such awareness is translated into something more meaningful. Organizations should measure the success of purpose-driven campaigns in ways that reflect the true, tangible and long-lasting impact of their campaigns.

Action-based KPIs can offset campaigns that are solely based on using marketing strategies to increase sales. As most organizations only report traditional KPIs, such as reach or even advertising equivalency, reporting action results gives the audience the idea that the brand cares about more than just the marketing of the brand. For example, the Popsockets' Poptivism campaign was driven by marketing, but Popsockets reported cause-related action-based events, including that donations funded the planting of 64,000 trees and 26 food vouchers for vulnerable refugee families. Likewise, March For Our Lives' evaluation included action-based results, including an increase in youth turnout and legislation surrounding gun control. Both campaigns had specific, timely goals, which were reflected in the ways they measured success.

In an example of what not to do, LUNA Bar's Equal Pay campaign was geared toward raising awareness about the pay gap but did not incorporate any tangible elements that actually affected the cause in a positive way. Therefore, the brand's measure of success was not as clear as other campaigns that were more action oriented. Had the organization taken it a step further and reported the actionable results of its campaign, it would have been more authentic and impactful.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS FOR PRACTITIONERS

- **There are pros and cons to each type of campaign brand fit.** Organizations should think carefully about which brand fit is the most authentic given their mission and the other elements of their

campaign. The cause should make sense given the context of the organization's purpose statement, past efforts and expertise, and should not be selected purely for self-serving reasons.

- **Researching target audiences and thought leadership research is imperative.** It will not only inform your campaign strategy but will position the organization as highly knowledgeable on the topic, leading to more campaign authenticity.
- **Messaging should focus on coalition-building for change,** even if that included competitors. This puts the social cause first instead of the competitive advantage that the campaign may give the company.
- **Cause-related partnerships can aid in campaign authenticity.** Avoid partnerships with influencers and celebrities who are not related to the cause or haven't demonstrated their individual commitment to it.
- **Purpose campaigns should include some sort of component internal to the company's structure and employees,** so that there is a connection between how the brand operates and what the brand wants to portray.
- **Campaigns should be interactive to maximize engagement and impact.**
- **KPIs for purpose-driven campaigns should include action-based, cause-related events rather than just media reach.**

## CONCLUSION

When reflecting on the contemporary conceptualizations of brand purpose in literature and discussion, this research agrees with the above cited definition of purpose being a company's reason for being beyond profits; it guides its business growth and impact on society (Carol Cone on Purpose, 2020). After reviewing the brand purpose practices of a variety of brands, we have identified some key best practices to guide public relations practitioners in creating truly authentic purpose-led campaigns, as follows.

When aiming to create an authentic campaign tied to brand purpose, a key factor to consider is the relationship of the cause to one's brand. Both broad causes related to company values and specific or local causes tied to one's industry and location can be successful, if proper research is conducted to increase the organization's knowledge of the issue and how best to communicate their initiatives to target audiences. Consider also the relationship of the company's revenue generation to the campaign, and if campaign proximity to revenue-generating practices or goals affects the campaign's authentic motives.

Clearly identifying the relationship between your brand and purpose statement is key. Purpose statements should be specific to the overall organization and reflected clearly in the organization's campaign. These statements should be specific; the most successful statements couldn't apply to another industry. Choosing one purpose statement that applies to all campaigns is also a best practice, centralizing your mission for all purpose-led campaigns.

Metrics, partnerships, messaging and internal and external engagement should all be action-based. Instead of just media reach evaluation, KPIs should include action events related to the cause. Partnerships should similarly be focused on action-based activities instead of just philanthropy and should involve both an internal employee engagement component, as well as an external action-based interactive campaign.

Overall, brand purpose needs to go above and beyond being an expression of a company's core value proposition and address issues that are of value to society and/or the environment, focused on the potential positive impact companies can have on society rather than the monetary benefits attached to supporting a cause.

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