

sproutsocial



stand up / stand aside

**Brands Creating Change in
the Conscious Consumer Era**

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Chapter one

Introduction

Today's brands aren't shy. While just a few years ago "no comment" was the standard response to controversial social and political issues, now it seems like brands can't join the conversation fast enough.

Consumer expectations are at the heart of this shift. New data from Sprout Social reveals the majority of consumers (70%) believe it's important for brands to take a public stand on social and political issues, a number that's increased since our [last survey on this topic in 2017](#). And brands have heard the message loud and clear. Following in the footsteps of [Nike](#) and [Patagonia](#), the list of brands taking social and political stands has grown to span every industry.

But with so many organizations eager to voice their beliefs, the social media landscape has become saturated with brand-sponsored cause marketing and even accusations of "[woke-washing](#)"—or brands using social activism as an advertising ploy. [Forty-six percent](#) of Americans who use social media say they feel worn out by political posts and discussions.

To understand how brands can effectively navigate this risky business, we surveyed more than 1,500 U.S. consumers to determine when and why they want brands to speak out on political issues and how brands can make a difference using social media. With the findings from this report, brands can develop stronger, more effective social strategies when it comes time to put their stake in the ground.

Chapter two

Key findings

Brands have a chance to not only share where they stand on specific public issues, but to drive real change. Our survey found:

It's more important than ever for brands to take a stand on public issues.

Seventy percent of consumers say it's important for brands to take a stand on social and political issues, up from 64% in 2017. As for how consumers want brands to take a stand, nearly half of consumers (47%) want brands to take a stand on social media.

Brands have an opportunity to make a real impact using social media.

Sixty-six percent of consumers who want brands to take a stand on social say it's because they believe brands can create real change. And 67% of consumers say brands are effective at raising awareness around important public issues when they speak out on social.

Yet vocal brands have a perception problem.

More than half of consumers (53%) believe brands only take a stand for public relations or marketing purposes. For a more effective stance? Consumers say it boosts a brand's credibility when the issue they take a stand on directly impacts their customers (37%) or business operations (36%).

Navigating politics remains risky business.

Fifty-five percent of all consumers say they would boycott or discontinue shopping with brands that support public issues that don't align with their own views. And 34% of consumers will decrease their spending with a brand whose stances they disagree with. But when brands do take a stand consumers align with, 36% say they'll purchase more from that company.

Brands need to be ready for employees to take a stand.

More than three-quarters of all consumers (77%) believe employees have a responsibility to speak up when their employers make business decisions that contradict a company's stated values. Additionally, 51% of consumers believe social media is the best place for employees to voice these types of concerns.

Chapter three

Taking a stand is the new normal

Brands today have proven increasingly willing to take part in—and even lead—discussion on meaningful public issues, and new examples of brands taking a stand crop up daily. A [collective of brands](#), including Spotify, Pinterest and Etsy, promoted giving U.S. workers Election Day off and making it a federal holiday for all employees. In response to current events, Airbnb launched its [#WeAccept](#) campaign with the goal of providing short-term housing for 100,000 people in need (from refugees to disaster survivors) over the next five years. In the wake of a mass shooting in one of its stores, [Walmart](#) ended sales of all handgun ammunition.

And while taking a stand can mean putting your business at risk, it's what consumers demand. Regardless of their political beliefs, 70% of consumers feel it's important for brands to take a stand on public issues, a sentiment that's grown 6% from the 2017 survey in our first [Brands Get Real](#) report.

70%
**of consumers believe
it's important for brands
to take a stand**



Different generations feel quite differently about brands taking a stand. Three-quarters of Generation Z and 80% of Millennials say it's important for brands to take a stand, compared to just 68% of Baby Boomers and 58% of Generation X who feel similarly.

As for which issues consumers want brands to speak out on, healthcare (39%) ranks number one, followed by labor laws (38%) and climate change (36%). For comparison, in 2017 the top three issues consumers wanted brands to take a stand on were human rights, labor laws and poverty. While the 2017 survey didn't specifically call out climate change, environmental issues overall ranked fifth in terms of topics people wanted brands to take a stand on, and healthcare ranked second to last.

Consumers believe it's important for brands to take a stand

Liberal consumers

79%



Conservative consumers

65%

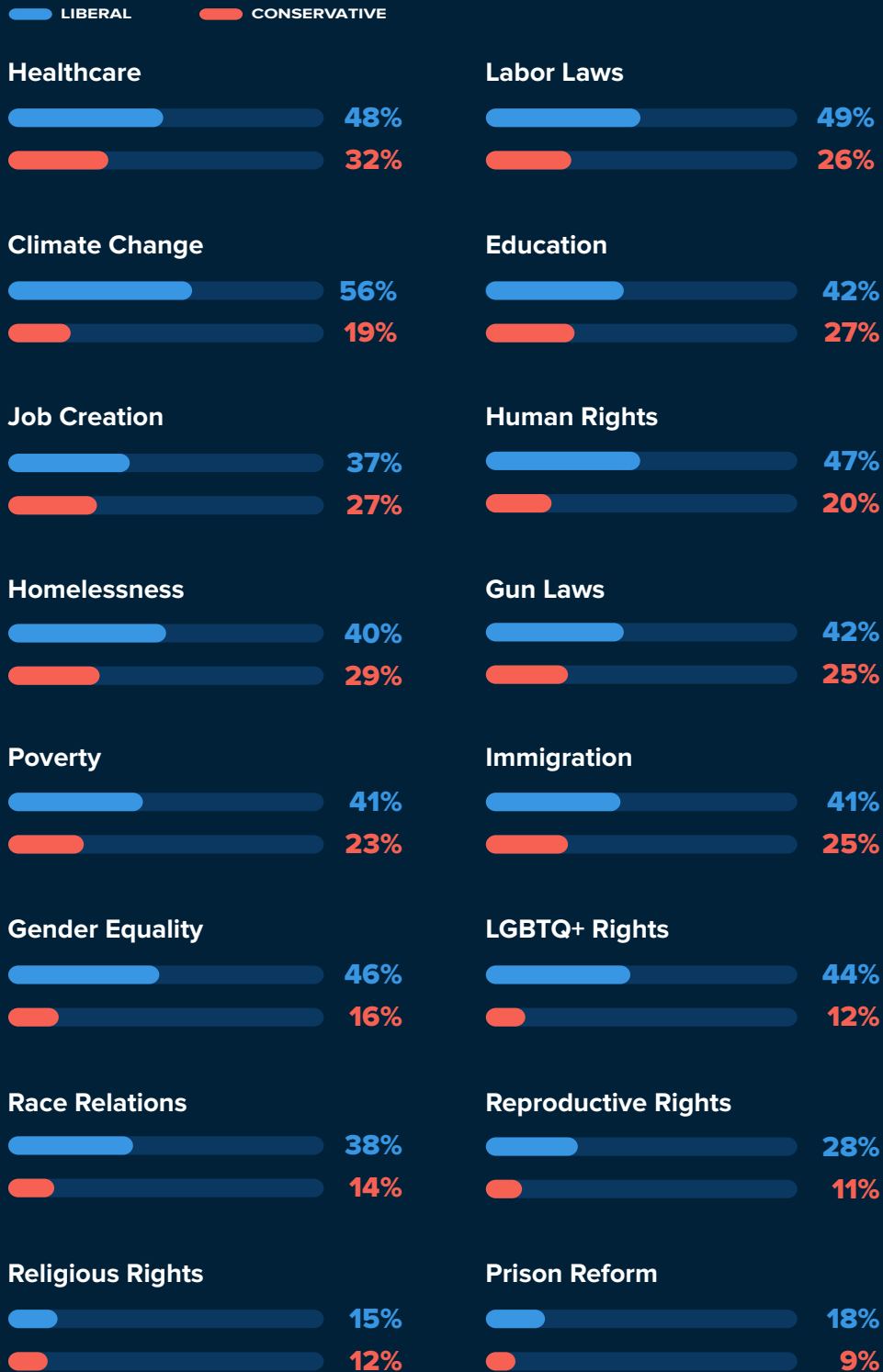


Moderate consumers

67%



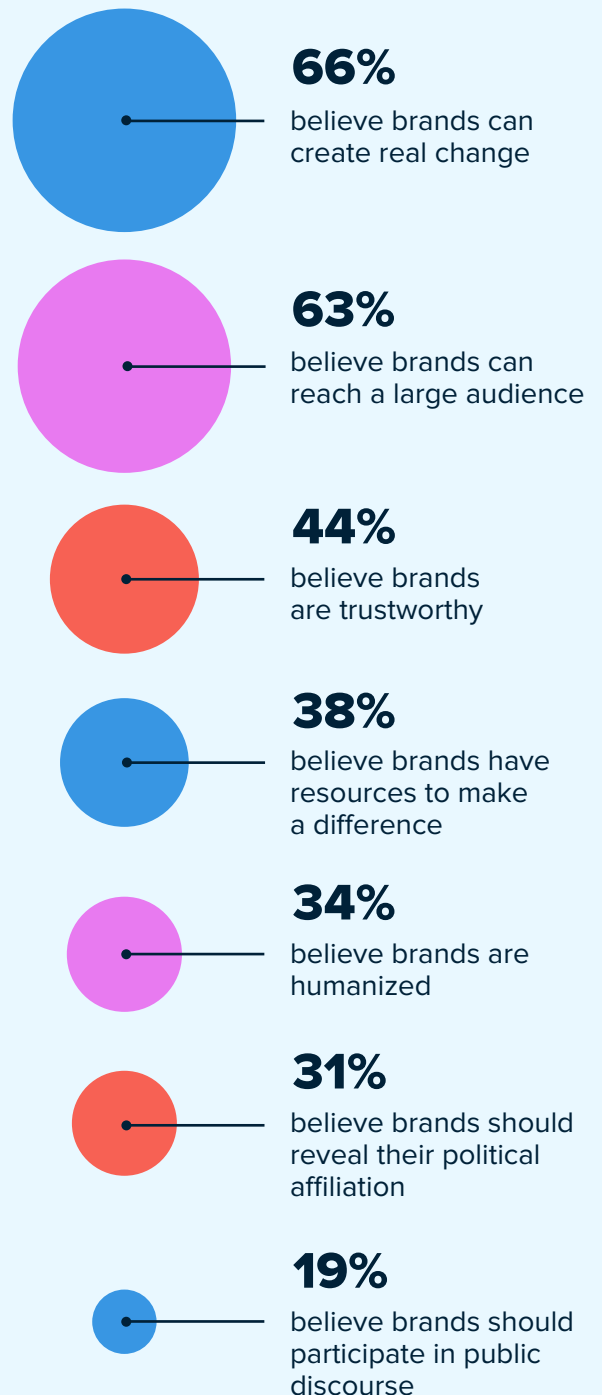
The issues consumers want brands to take a stand on



Taking a stand comes with its own set of risks and rewards. Over half of consumers (55%) say they would boycott a brand whose stance they disagreed with. Among liberal consumers, 65% say they would boycott brands they disagree with, while 58% of conservative customers would do the same. On the other hand, when they agree with a brand's stance, 37% of consumers say they would recommend the brand to friends and family. Thirty-six percent say they would purchase more from that brand and 29% would publicly praise or promote it.

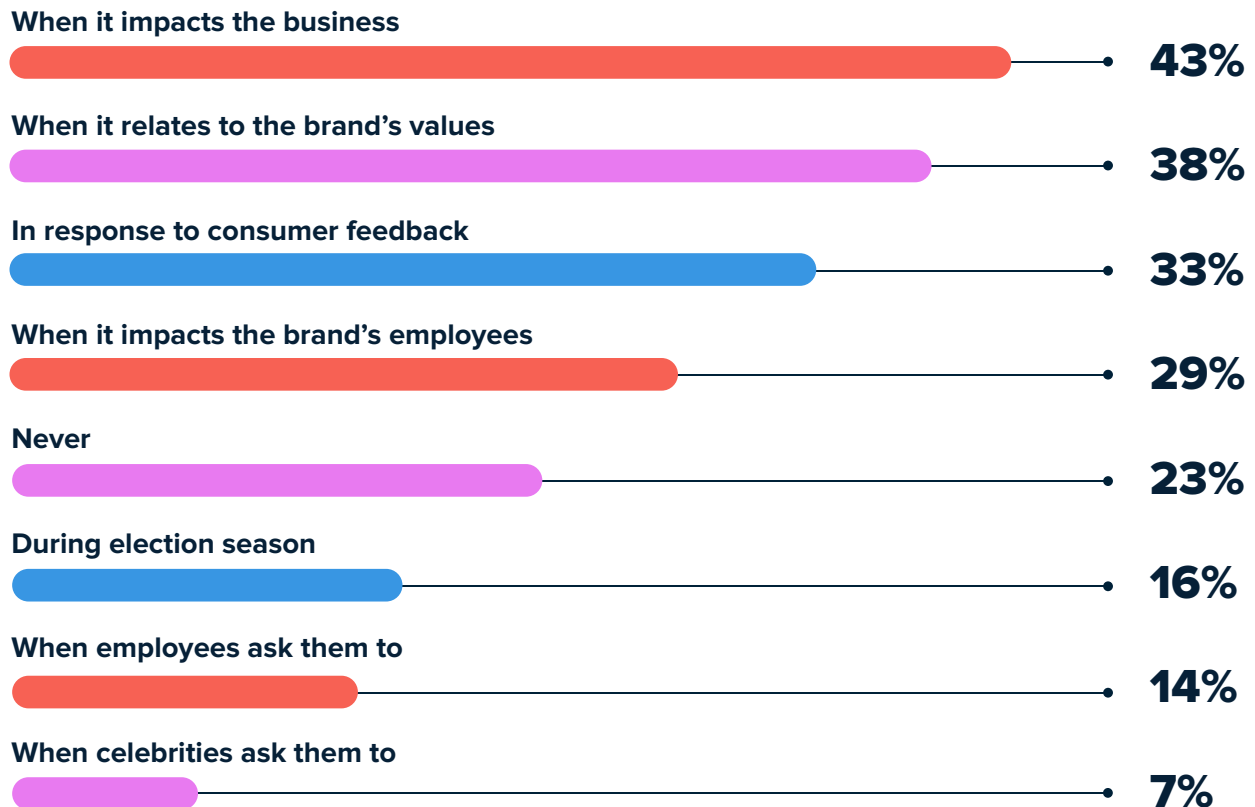
As for how consumers want brands to communicate their position on public issues, nearly half of consumers (47%) say they want brands to take a stand on social media. Of the consumers who want brands to take a stand on social, 66% believe brands should do so because they can create real change and 63% of consumers say brands can use their platform to reach a wide audience. Trust is also a factor; of the consumers who want brands to voice their opinions on social, 44% believe brands should speak up because people trust them.

Why consumers want brands to take a stand on social media



There's a time and place for everything, and the same holds true for brands taking a stand. Asked when it is appropriate for brands to take a stand on social media, 43% of consumers say brands should speak out when an issue directly impacts their business. Thirty-eight percent of customers say brands should take a stand when a topic relates to a company's values and 33% say brands should respond when faced with consumer backlash. On the other hand, 23% of consumers say it's never appropriate for brands to take a stand on social media.

When consumers want brands to take a stand on public issues



#BrandsGetReal: Walmart

One divisive public issue frequently making its way into the headlines is gun control. For [Walmart](#), the decision to publicly take a stand on guns after a shooting in one of their stores has drawn both criticism and praise from consumers on both ends of the political spectrum.

Facing public pressure on social platforms from consumers and groups like [Everytown](#), Walmart took steps to discontinue sales of ammunition over the summer of 2019. Additionally, the retailer has started asking customers not to openly carry firearms in the store even in states where open carry is legal.

Walmart Inc. 
@WalmartInc 

We've been working to understand the many important issues arising from the horrific events in El Paso and Southaven, as well as those raised in the national discussion around gun violence. Today, we're sharing some next steps: walmart.us/2MRYiBJ

We understand our heritage, our deeply rooted place in America and our influence as the world's largest retailer. And we understand the responsibility that comes with it. In a complex situation lacking a simple solution, we are trying to take constructive steps to reduce the risk that events like these will happen again. The status quo is unacceptable.

Doug McMillon
PRESIDENT AND CEO, WALMART

12:10 PM • Sep 3, 2019

8K Retweets 35.8K Likes

Despite some consumer backlash, it appears Walmart's gun stance has inspired other retailers and supermarkets to institute a similar policy. [Wegmans](#) and [CVS](#) have both Tweeted statements echoing Walmart's ask that customers not openly carry their guns in their respective stores.

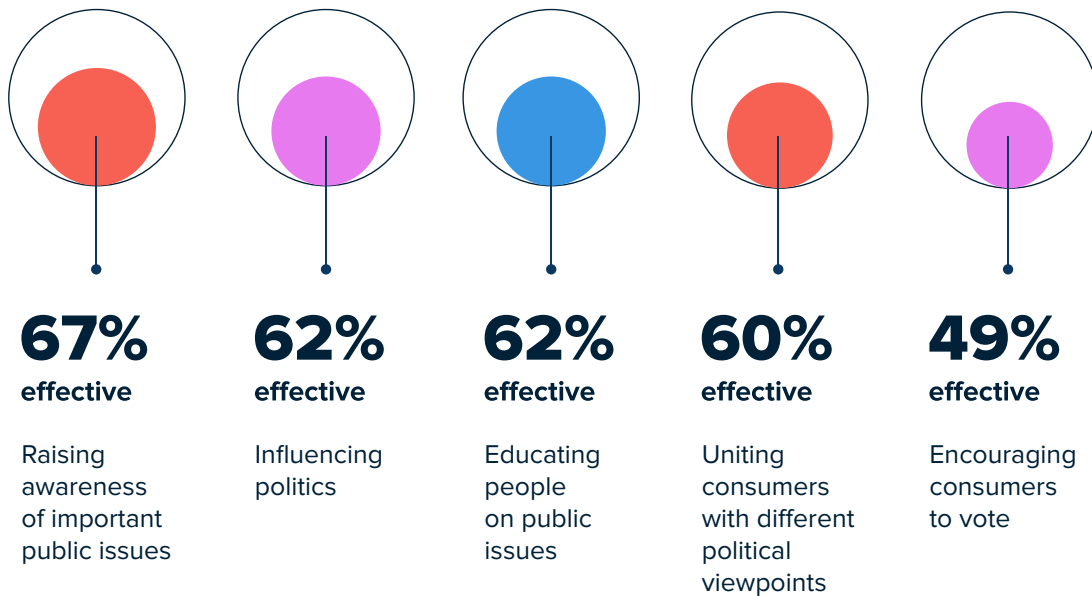
Chapter four

Brands are making a difference

Brands taking a stand are impacting more than their business. Forty-one percent of consumers say their opinions on public issues are influenced by what brands post on social media, a 21% increase from consumers who said the same thing in 2017.

Beyond changing hearts and minds, brand stances have been effective in cultivating discussions and highlighting issues deserving of our culture's attention. Sixty-seven percent of consumers say brands have been effective in raising awareness around important public issues while 62% believe brands are successfully educating consumers on important topics.

Consumer perception of how effective brands are at driving change



Brands taking a stand also inspire consumers to take action. When prompted by a brand, 61% of consumers will conduct further research into an issue, and 53% of consumers say they are likely to register to vote. Prior to the 2018 midterms, for example, [Snapchat](#) integrated voter registration technology directly into its platform and registered more than [400,000 new voters](#).

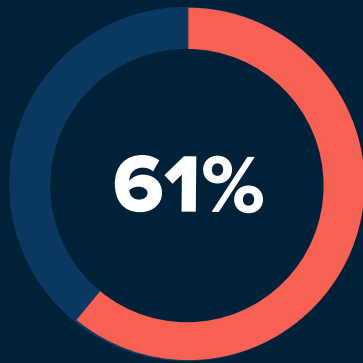
#BrandsGetReal: Whirlpool

For some brands, taking a stand means raising awareness and uniting consumers around an issue and its potential impact on their communities. In the midst of conversations about education, Whirlpool has chosen to focus on an often-unrealized barrier to elementary school students' future: dirty clothes. Recognizing the correlation between dirty clothes and children's drop out rates, Whirlpool launched its [Care Counts program](#) in 2016 and has since provided 38,000 kids with access to clean clothing. After the first year of the pilot program in 2016, [research](#) found 95% of participants demonstrated an increased motivation in class and 90% of tracked students improved their overall attendance.

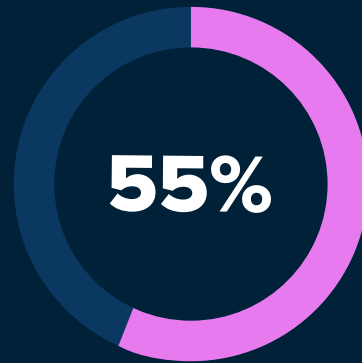


To further educate consumers about the negative impact dirty laundry has on children's schooling, [Whirlpool](#) uses its Twitter profile to share original content highlighting the correlation between clean clothes and attendance. Videos feature educators whose classrooms have benefited from the laundry program, and the hashtag #CareCounts invites anyone to join the conversation on social. To simplify spreading the word, Whirlpool also provides ready-made social posts consumers can share to their personal networks about the program and the value of providing clean clothing to students.

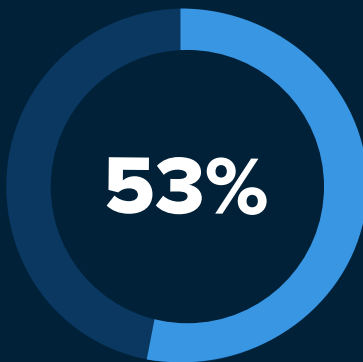
Social/political actions consumers are likely to take when prompted by brands



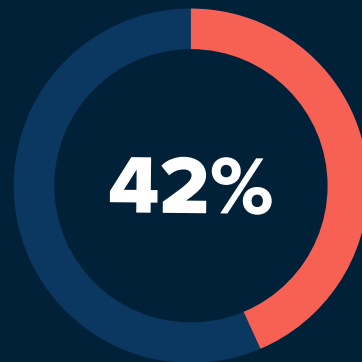
Research an issue further



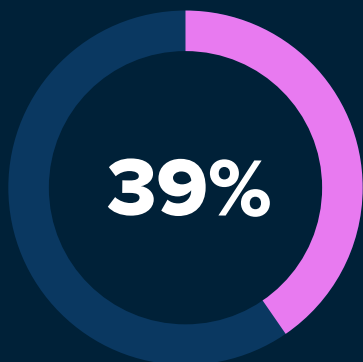
Donate to a cause



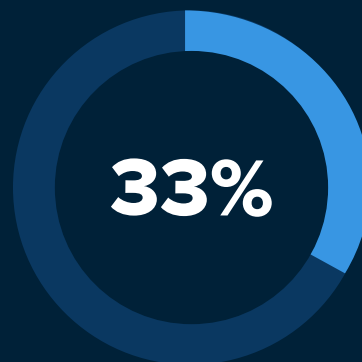
Register to vote



Vote for a specific candidate



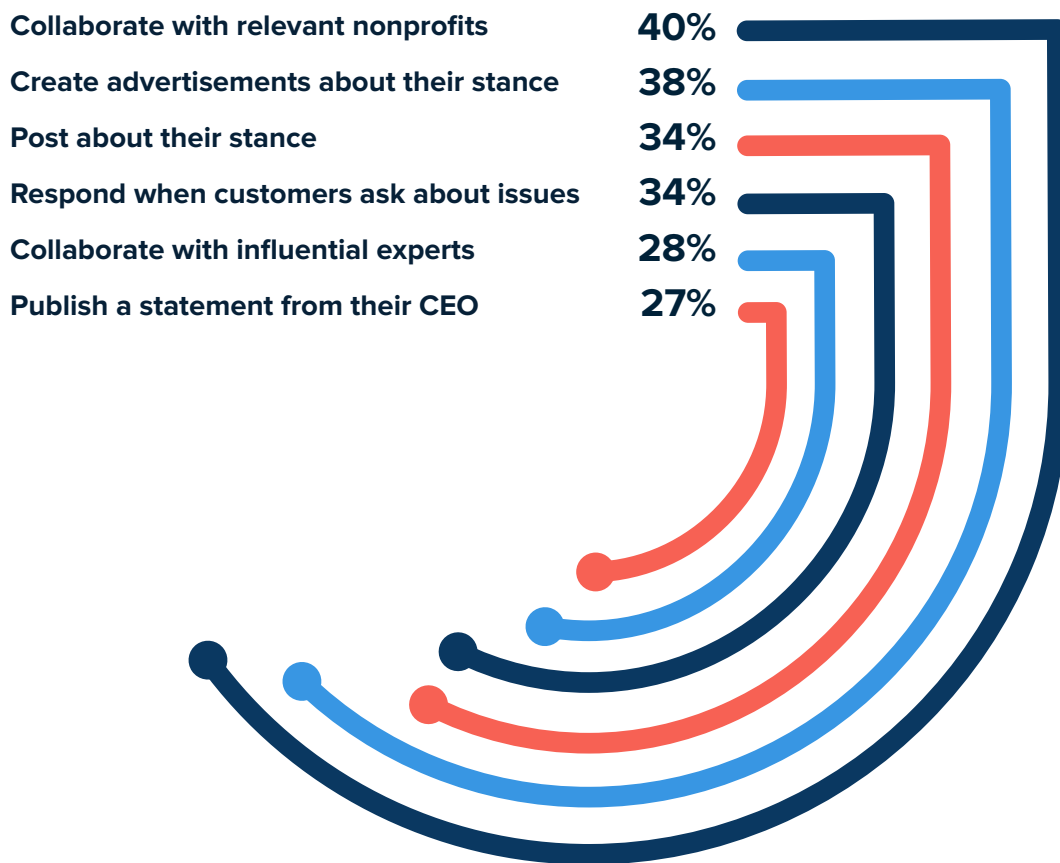
Participate in a protest



Contact a politician

Actions speak louder than words, and the same holds true for brands taking a stand on social media. According to 40% of consumers, the best way for brands to express their public stance on social media is to collaborate with a nonprofit devoted to that issue. Other ways consumers say brands should express their values on social media include creating advertisements (38%) and posting content about their stance (34%). As consumers increasingly monitor what brands say and do on social media, brands should consider the language they use to raise awareness around certain issues and carefully vet organizations before partnering with them.

How brands should take a stand on social media

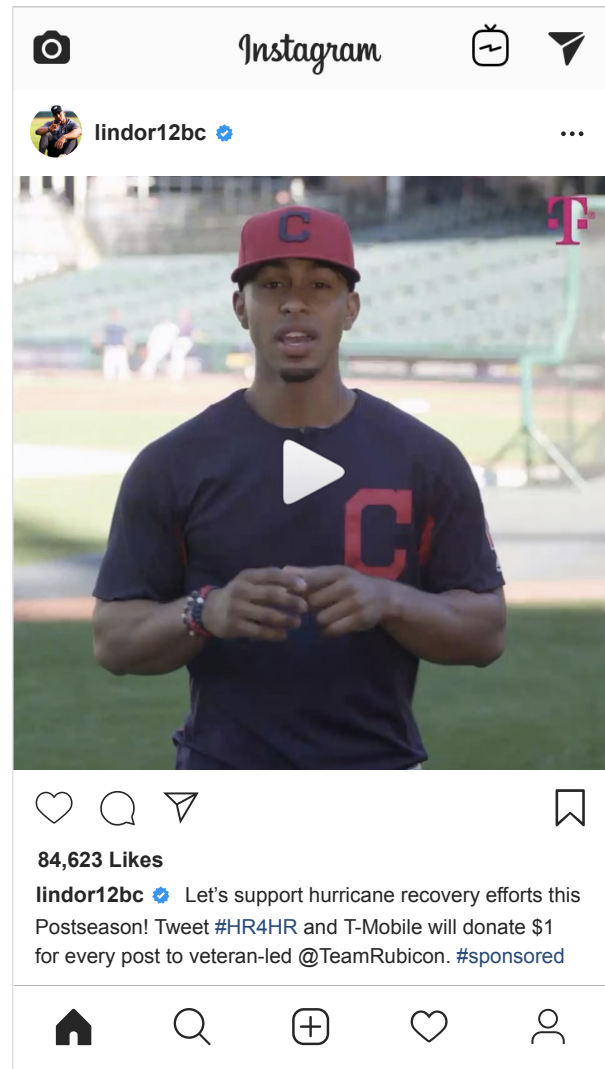


#BrandsGetReal: T-Mobile and MLB

Few brands are as steadfast as T-Mobile is in their belief that businesses are obligated to use their platform to create real change. The telecommunications company has long championed giving back to communities and is especially committed to supporting military veterans and those impacted by natural disasters. So, in the wake of Hurricanes Maria, Harvey and Irma, T-Mobile saw an opportunity to combine America's favorite pastime with a fundraiser for the veteran-led nonprofit, [Team Rubicon](#).

The wireless carrier chose to use its platform as MLB's official sponsor to raise awareness among baseball fans about the recovery efforts taking place in Puerto Rico, Texas and Florida. Not only did T-Mobile encourage baseball fans everywhere to donate what they could, the telecommunications company pledged to donate \$20,000 per postseason home run and an extra [\\$2 for every Tweet](#) or Instagram post containing the hashtag #HR4HR.

The campaign, which ran on social and traditional media during the World Series, drew the support of baseball fans and several prominent players. During the 2017 season, T-Mobile raised more than [\\$2.5 million for Team Rubicon](#), and the #HR4HR campaign has raised more than \$4 million to date.



Chapter five

Fixing the brand perception problem

More brands are taking a stand than ever before, but those efforts matter little if consumers don't trust the brands speaking out. In the last couple of years, brand credibility has actually taken a slight hit—39% of consumers feel brands are not credible when taking a stand, up 18% from 2017. When asked how they feel when brands speak out, the top response from consumers is “neutral,” followed by “skeptical” and “curious.” While most consumers indicated that they feel “neutral,” conservatives said they feel “angered” and liberals said they feel “curious.”

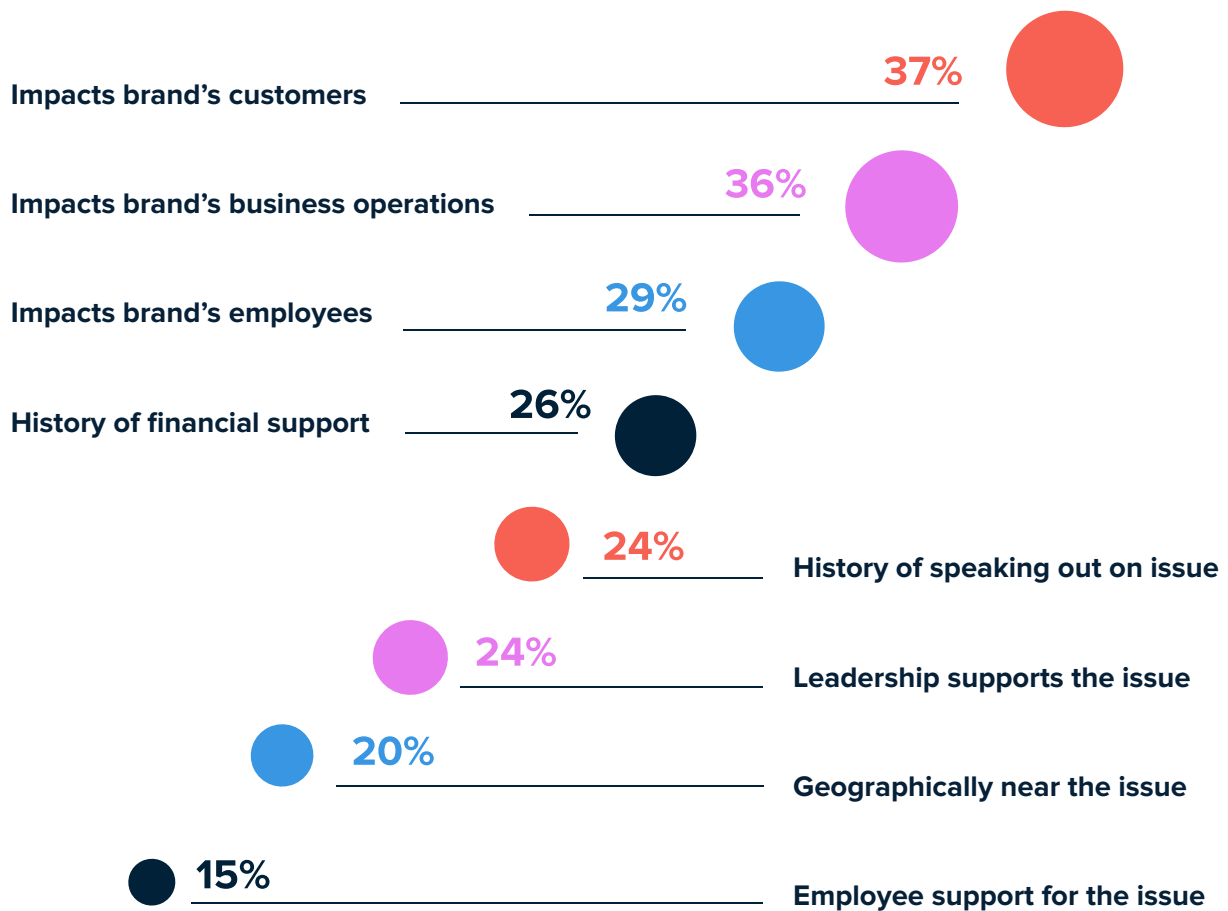
Overall, 53% of consumers believe brands take a stand for public relations and marketing purposes. Hurting the cause further? Thirty-five percent of consumers perceive brands speaking out as jumping on the bandwagon. Cynical views of brands taking stands have even given way to new terminology like woke-washing, or appropriating social activism for marketing purposes, or [rainbow capitalism](#), when businesses take advantage of the LGBTQ+ movement for sales and marketing purposes.

Consumer perception on why brands take a stand



For brands to win over consumers and avoid being labeled as bandwagoners, companies need to prioritize issues that are relevant to their business. Thirty-seven percent of consumers say a brand's stance is believable when it's about an issue that directly impacts its customers. Brands can also boost their credibility among consumers by speaking out on issues that impact their business operations (36%) and issues that affect their employees (29%).

What makes a brand's stance on issues credible



Another way brands can gauge how consumers will react to their stance is by identifying which public issues matter most to their audience. Tools like social listening, for example, can illuminate which topics are top of mind for customers and provide brands the insight they need to join the conversation, raise awareness and take meaningful action.

Consider the differing priorities among conservative versus liberal crowds. The number one issue conservative consumers want brands to take a stand on is healthcare; for liberal consumers, it's climate change. Similarly, issues like LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality and gun control are likely to resonate with the liberal crowd while conservative consumers want brands to talk about job creation and homelessness.

When consumers agree with a brand's stance, 37% will refer that company to their friends and family and 36% will buy more from that brand. If brands truly believe they can make a difference by taking a stand, understanding and aligning with consumer interests is crucial for creating a successful campaign and powerful results.

#BrandsGetReal: LUNA® Bar

It's little surprise that the first nutrition bar aimed at and founded by women, [LUNA® Bar](#), is a staunch supporter of issues like women's rights and equal pay. Realizing their female consumer base likely shared similar values, LUNA® Bar saw an opportunity to raise awareness around gender equality on the international stage.

Ahead of the 2019 Women's World Cup, LUNA® Bar created the [LUNA® Laces campaign](#) for supporters of equal pay and equality to wear and share branded shoelaces on social media. Supporters were also able to create and customize their own images to download and post to Twitter and Instagram with the hashtag #SomedayIsNow. And the support from LUNA® didn't stop there: In addition to raising awareness and uniting consumers on social, the company also paid every woman on the [US World Cup roster](#) the money to make their roster bonus equal to what the men's team received.



Chapter six

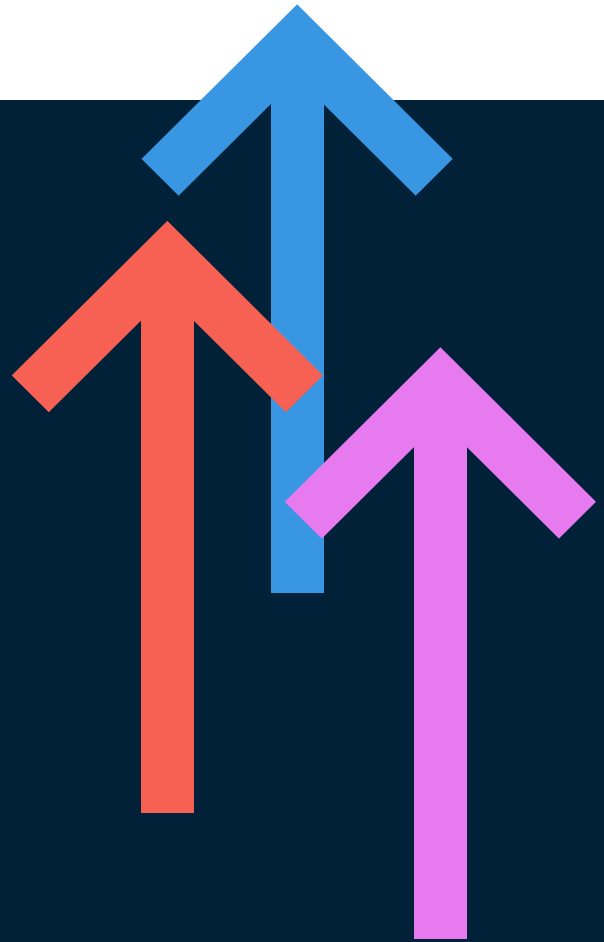
A united front starts from within

Consumers have let brands know just how important it is for them to weigh in on public issues because companies are in a position to enact real change. Through social media, brands can both identify what matters most to their audience and determine the most effective way to voice their support. But employees and executives are also key stakeholders when it comes to effectively taking a stand.

Consumers want to see a brand's leadership speak up; more than half (56%) say it's important to them that a CEO takes a stand on public issues. Increasing transparency into a brand's leadership is a must-have for engaging and building a rapport with consumers. [Our previous research](#) reveals that when a CEO is transparent on social, 38% of consumers will increase their brand loyalty and 32% will buy more from that brand.

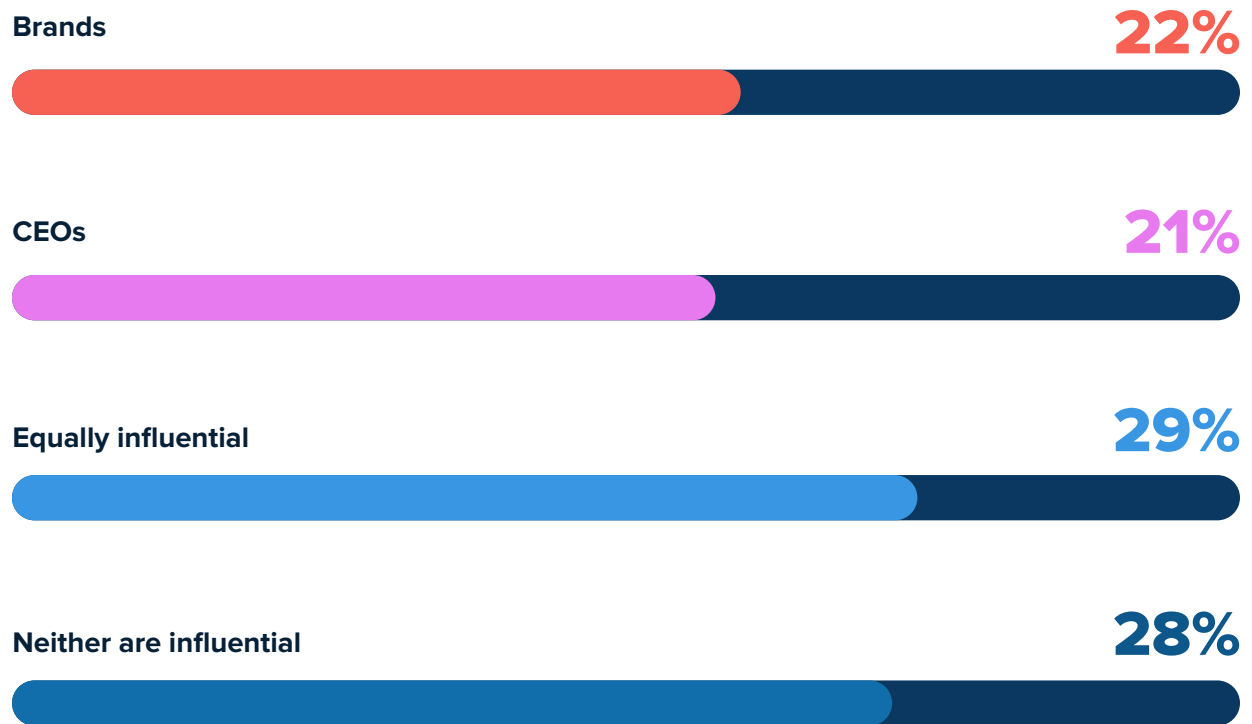
56%

of consumers say it's important for CEOs to take a stand on public issues



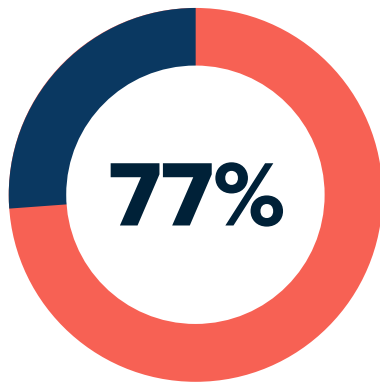
That being said, a united front is more powerful than a house divided. More than half (54%) of consumers believe a CEO and their company should hold the same position on public issues. If the two are in opposition, 19% of consumers say they'd be willing to boycott that brand. Consumers value hearing from both the CEO and the brand, with 29% saying the two are equally influential when taking stands on social media. A social strategy that resonates with consumers needs to incorporate messaging from both the brand and its leadership team.

Whose stance on public issues is more influential to consumers

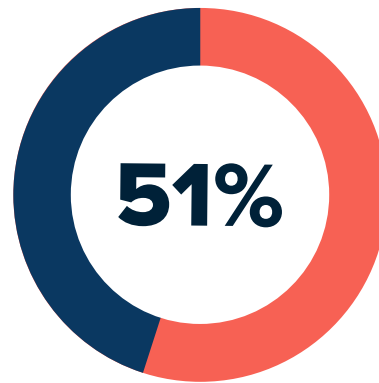


During times of conflict and misalignment, consumers are looking to a company's employees to speak up and stand for what is right. More than three-quarters of consumers (77%) believe employees have a responsibility to say something when their employers make business decisions that contradict a brand's stated values. And 51% of consumers believe social media provides employees the best outlet to voice their beliefs.

How consumers feel about employees taking a stand



of consumers say employees should speak up when business decisions contradict company values



of consumers say social media is the most effective way for employees to voice their concerns

More than any other generation, Millennials want employees to take a stand: 83% of Millennials believe employees have a responsibility to speak up when their employer contradicts its stated values, compared to 79% of Gen Z, 75% of Gen X and 71% of Baby Boomers. Millennials also firmly believe social is the most effective way for employees to voice their concerns. Sixty-three percent of Millennials say social is the best outlet for employees to speak up and 59% of Gen Z agrees—but this number drops off sharply for Gen X (48%) and Boomers (45%).

#BrandsGetReal: ban.do

When it comes to talking about anxiety and depression on social media, few leaders are more vocal than [Jen Gotch](#). The co-founder and chief creative officer for [ban.do](#) uses her social platform to educate and raise awareness around all things mental health related, sharing her own personal experience with depression. Her podcast, “Jen Gotch Is OK...Sometimes,” features candid conversations on topics like how to balance work and mental health and how to find a therapist.

The mental health advocacy doesn't stop with Gotch—it's also a prominent message promoted on [ban.do's](#) website and social media profiles. The [feel better initiative](#), hosted on the ban.do site, features educational content and third-party resources consumers can use to learn more about personal health and where to find professional help. Since launching the feel better initiative, Gotch and ban.do have raised more than \$80,000 for Bring Change to Mind, a nonprofit organization dedicated to encouraging dialogue around mental health.



Taking a stand: Next steps for a social-first brand

As brands increasingly weigh in on the issues concerning the world today, companies are realizing that taking a stand can generate awareness and even bring financial benefit. But more importantly, taking a stand gives brands an opportunity to make a real difference. The question is no longer “should our company take a stand?” but rather, “how can we maximize our impact?”

To further broadcast their stance and increase their impact, brands are turning to one of the most powerful communication platforms today: social media. Brands looking to take full advantage of this direct line to consumers and inspire real change should start with the following strategies when taking a stand on social.

Make your values clear from day one.

Consumers want brands to uphold the values established when they began following brands in the first place. Because unlike private individuals, businesses have the platform and financial resources to create change. Prior to declaring a public stance, brands need to consider how they’ll back up their statements through their actions, and they need to be prepared for consumers to hold them accountable.

Consider what’s most important to your customers.

Instead of reacting to trending topics, take the time to proactively ask customers which issues are most important to them. Then, identify where your brand’s values and the topics consumers want to talk about intersect. Research that incorporates your audience will result in campaigns that not only resonate, but are more likely to inspire followers to take action.

Focus on the big picture impact.

Brands have an opportunity to inspire consumers to take purposeful action—but what brands say and do on social can determine whether they are successful in influencing consumer behavior. After identifying an issue that’s meaningful to your brand, think about the actions you want to encourage among consumers as a result of taking a public stand: registering to vote, researching an issue, starting a fundraiser or something else. The social strategy brands create should incorporate all of the marketing expertise at their disposal to directly ladder up to those goals.

Collaborate with nonprofits and experts.

To better educate consumers on important public issues, brands should consider partnering with nonprofits and third-party experts devoted to that topic. Working with outside experts can boost a brand's credibility when taking a stance and it also gives consumers an additional resource they can use to deepen their understanding of an issue. When crafting social posts, for example, brands can highlight their collaboration with reputable organizations and use their platform to elevate the work nonprofits are doing.

Bring employees into the conversation.

For companies to truly do good, they also need to listen and engage with their employees. Employee activism is quickly gaining steam and consumers are throwing their support behind employees who speak up against controversial business decisions. To create authentic stands that resonate with consumers, brands need to be open to hearing and implementing diverse perspectives from their own employees.

Once content with sitting on the sidelines, brands today aren't afraid to wade into political conversations and let consumers know where they stand on divisive issues. Thanks to social media, it's easier than ever for buyers to identify which issues matter to the brands they shop with and how companies are turning their words into action.

At the same time, however, social has empowered consumers to hold brands accountable to their commitment and to make good on their promises. Consumers expect a lot from brands that choose to take a stand, but they're also confident in brands' ability to make a difference from raising awareness of issues to encouraging people to vote.

Brands today have the opportunity—and the responsibility—to stand for something bigger than themselves. Whether brands are going to be the ones driving social change or watching it go by is up to them.

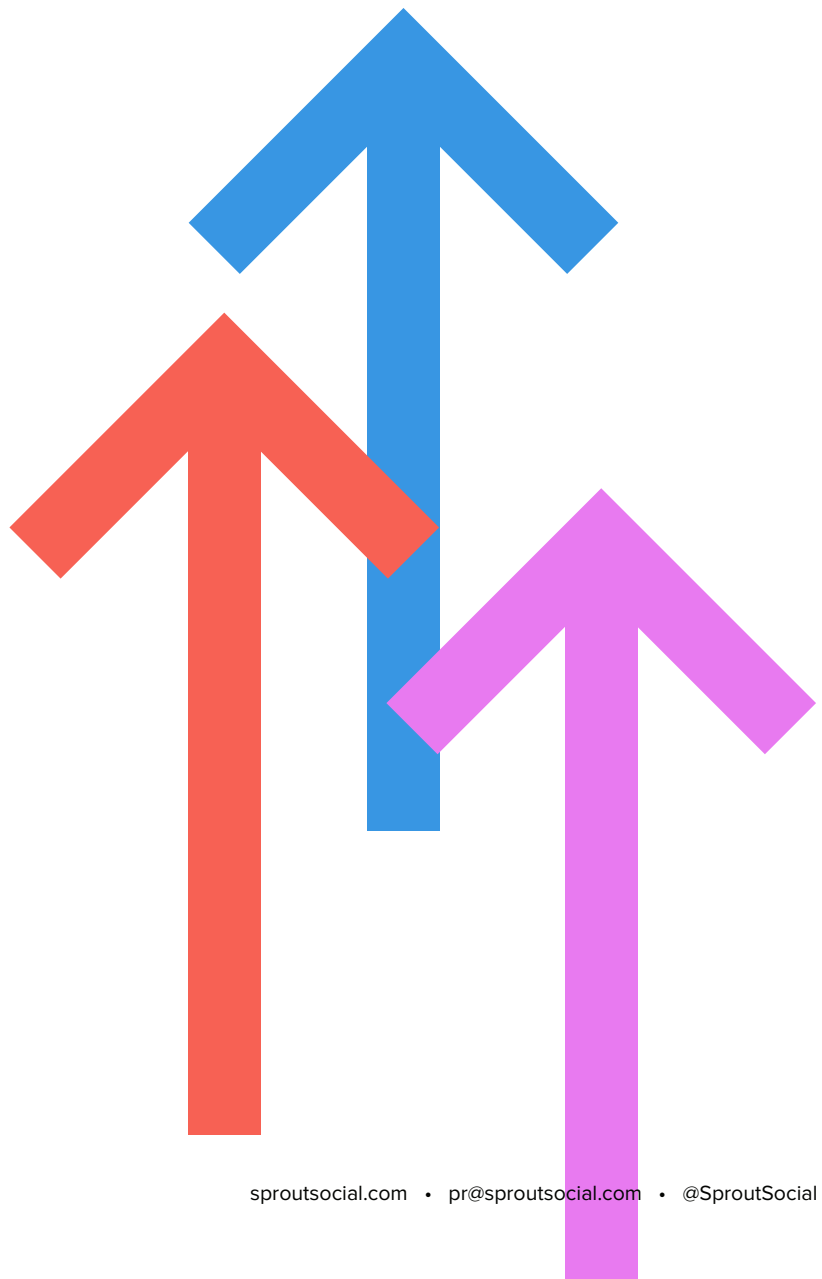
Chapter eight

About the data

About the data

The “Brands Creating Change in the Conscious Consumer Era” study is based on a survey of 1,505 U.S. consumers. The survey was conducted online between August 21-26, 2019. Graphics are rounded to the nearest percentage and may not add up to exactly 100%.

For questions about the data, please contact pr@sproutsocial.com.





Sprout Social

Sprout Social offers deep social media listening and analytics, social management, customer care, and advocacy solutions to more than 20,000 brands and agencies worldwide. Sprout's suite of solutions supports every aspect of a cohesive social program and enables organizations of all sizes to extend their reach, amplify their brand and create the kind of real connection with their consumers that drives their businesses forward. Headquartered in Chicago, Sprout operates across major social media networks, including Google, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram and LinkedIn. Learn more at sproutsocial.com.