

TEACHING BRIEF

**Beyond slacktivism: Lessons for authentic
activist messages through public relations
(Teaching brief for Teaching Activism Special
Issue)**

Melissa Janoske McLean, Tenured and Beyond Coaching, LLC
Kim Marks Malone, University of Memphis

ABSTRACT

This teaching brief looks at two aspects of public relations work for organizations who wish to make issue/activist statements: how to write an effective statement that is followed by action, and how to engage in ethical conversation with publics about the statement. The brief also addresses what happens if there are no follow up actions, and how to build relationships with the dominant coalition in order to aid in writing statements that will match organizational actions. These two lessons each include a discussion of purpose, materials, objectives, activities, and assessment (including ACEJMC assessment format and terminology) for easy adaptation into the public relations classroom.

Keywords: brand activism, corporate activism, activist statement, ethics, activism, public relations

Building relationships with an organization's or client's publics often occurs through the writing and dissemination of statements. Historically, these statements are distributed through traditional news outlets but more and more often, they are also being shared via social media.

These statements are going beyond announcing new products or changes in organizational leadership; organizations are also offering statements of opinion and belief, especially about social issues, social policies, and social change, and publics are watching very closely. This teaching brief will look at how PR professionals can help clients make corporate social activism (CSA) count through writing effective statements that are followed-up by action, incorporating organizational values into the statement and supporting their organization's or client's beliefs. It's important to note that the vocabulary for these types of statements and actions by organizations is developing with some referring to it as advocacy (Dodd & Supa, 2014) and some as activism (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018; Hambrick & Wowak, 2019; Oikkonen & Jääskeläinen, 2019). With the increased emphasis on an organization's actions (Bhagwat et al, 2020) – both stand-alone and in support of statements – corporate social activism is the term used in this teaching brief.

While understanding how to write these statements effectively is important, it is also important for PR professionals to understand that not every public will agree with them all the time. PR professionals need to be prepared for backlash on these statements from publics who disagree with them. This lesson will look at how to acknowledge and work through their anger or vitriol with the organization or individual and to ethically communicate with these publics, and potentially make them allies.

Follow through must play a role here. Organizations offering statements supporting a social issue or policy must be ready to follow-up with actions that also support it. This lesson will address what happens

if that doesn't occur, and how to write statements that will match organizational actions.

Public relations practitioners need to be able to write these activism statements, make sure their organization is supportive of the words and the necessary actions, and engage in ethical communication with their publics about the statement and the actions of the organization. Therefore, this teaching brief will include two lessons: 1) recognizing and crafting an effective activist statement and 2) building ethical and activist relationships, as well as a case study. Each lesson includes learning objectives, activities, and assessments.

Lesson #1: Identify & Practice Writing Activist Statements for an Organization

Purpose:

To help students understand how PR professionals can craft effective social activist statements for sharing on a client's or organization's social media channels by studying and writing similar statements.

Materials:

A variety of social activist statements posted on social media channels or website from organizations, including Ben & Jerry's (to complement the case study below), Peloton, Nordstrom, Dove, Uber, and Gushers. We also recommend the professor look to see if their own university/college/department wrote statements for analysis.

Objectives:

At the end of the lesson students will be able to:

1. Discuss the differences between corporate social responsibility and corporate social activism.

2. Recognize corporate social activism messages.
3. Identify an organization's values from their written social activism statements.
4. Build connections between an organization's stated values and social causes through their actions.
5. Understand how to communicate authentically during times of heightened uncertainty.

Body of Lesson:

This lesson should start with a discussion of effective public relations writing and writing for activism and the differences between corporate social responsibility and corporate social activism.

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) can be defined as “*business firms contributing in a positive way to society by going beyond a narrow focus on profit maximization*” (McWilliams, 2015, p. 1). CSR focuses on an organization's actions that “advance social good beyond that which is required by law” (Kang et al, 2016, p. 59) and the strategies organization's take to demonstrate that it is operating ethically.

Activism is defined as “*the activity of working to achieve political or social change*” (Oxford Dictionary, 2020). In the past, activism has been viewed by public relations scholars and practitioners from an organization-centric point of view (Ciszek, 2015) because PR professionals typically find themselves in the position of responding to activism directed at the organization. Smith (2005, p. 6) defined activism as a process where pressure is exerted on organizations (or other institutions) to change policies and practices. Today, stakeholders expect an organization to demonstrate its values through public support for or against public policies on social or moral issues through both statements and actions. Bhagwat et

al (2020) call this phenomenon “corporate sociopolitical activism (CSA) also referred to as corporate social activism.

The main difference between CSR and CSA is that the focus of CSR efforts and initiatives are typically widely accepted and can be said to work within the framework of society’s *current* value system while CSA efforts and initiatives are typically polarizing and partisan (Bhagwat et al, 2020). An example that helps drive home the difference between CSR and CSA is Walmart. In 2015, Walmart stopped selling rifles commonly used in mass shootings, engaging in corporate social responsibility and distancing itself from the controversial firearms industry (Bhattarai, 2019). In 2019, following a mass shooting in one of its stores, Walmart CEO Doug McMillan urged lawmakers to enact stricter gun control measures, moving the retail giant from CSR to CSA (Tensley, 2019).

Important questions to ask and answer during the lesson include: What does persuasive writing look like in times of heightened uncertainty (typical during activist moments)? How do you humanize your communication efforts to demonstrate authenticity? How do you make sure a statement reflects corporate values and actions? How can you encourage publics who agree with you to extend their support via social media?

Key Concepts:

- Persuasive writing
- Communicating authentically
- Organizational values
- Uncertainty
- Corporate social activism vs corporate social responsibility

Activities:

1. Have students read and evaluate a variety of statements from organizations, including Ben & Jerry's and, if available, their own institution. What were the goals/objectives of these statements? What are the organizational values evident in the writing? How do they address their publics? Can students find evidence of the organization taking action to back up their statements? If not, what action(s) can they suggest? Why?
2. Then have students practice writing their own statement for an organization and issue of their own choosing. How will they make sure it reflects organizational values? Who are the main publics they are trying to reach? Who are the stakeholders that may and may not support the organization's statement and actions? How will they balance writing to those who support them with those who may not? Have students plan out at least one follow-on action that the organization can take after the statement is released to back up their words.

Evaluation:

- Student understanding of concepts will be demonstrated by their contributions to the discussion.
- The in-class writing exercise (Activity #2) will be peer reviewed and edited, and then their statements and recommended actions will be shared with the class for analysis and discussion.

How assessment of student learning will be met:

Awareness

- Learn about corporate social activism and the role that public relations plays in helping an organization demonstrate its values to

stakeholders.

- Learn the importance of an organization backing up social activism statements with action.
- Analyze existing content on popular social media platforms to determine an organization's or brand's values, goals, and objectives.

Understanding

- Given social media content, distinguish the differences between corporate social responsibility and corporate social activism.
- Recognize social issues and policies that align with an organization based on the organization's stated values.

Application

- Improve persuasive writing and authentic communication skills through written corporate and brand social activism statements.
- Choose appropriate actions for an organization to take in support of social activism statements.

Lesson #2: Ethical Activist Communication with Publics

Purpose:

To understand how to ethically communicate with and engage with publics regarding comments resulting from social activism statements, especially with followers who disagree with them or shame the organization for past actions or lack of action that supports the organization's stand.

Materials:

Access to Ben & Jerry's, Peloton, Nordstrom, Dove, Uber, and Gushers social media pages (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram), with a focus on the content announcing corporate social activist statements and/or actions.

Again, if their university/college/department issued a corporate activist statement and/or took action, this should be included as well. These posts should include access to a sample of comments and responses that agree and disagree with the organization's statements/actions.

Objectives:

1. Explain the differences between bandwagon activism and social activism.
2. Identify techniques and language to humanize responses to hostile followers on social media platforms.
3. Create authentic messages to effectively engage with hostile followers on social media platforms.
4. Discuss the differences between audiences and communication strategies on popular social media platforms.

Body of Lesson:

This lesson will start by reviewing best practices for engaging with audiences on social media - from followers who applaud your brand to followers who are critical, emotional or abusive. For examples of best practices see *Social Media: How to Engage, Share, and Connect* (Luttrell, 2016) and *Social Media for Strategic Communication: Creative Strategies and Research-Based Applications* (Freberg, 2019). Additionally, the importance of organizational accountability (sharing about the action behind the words) and 'owning' past errors (apologizing for past organizational mistakes), will be emphasized. Students will discuss and evaluate the responses of organizations to both positive and negative comments to their statements on different social media platforms. Different types of activism (bandwagon and corporate social) will be looked at, discussed and differentiated.

Bandwagon activism happens when an organization's social activist statements aren't seen as genuine and authentic and aren't followed up by action. When an organization's statements are viewed by the public as "jumping on the bandwagon" and only one-time opportunities to employ temporary tactics, CSA can backfire (Sakoui & Faughnder, 2020). An example of this is when Amazon faced scrutiny for sharing statements supporting Black Lives Matter without implementing any real changes to reflect the statements into their internal policies and business practices (Paul, 2020).

Key Concepts:

- Bandwagon activism versus corporate social activism
- Humanizing the message
- Adapting strategies for audiences on different platforms
- Actions speak louder than words

Activities:

1. Have students look at an organization's social activist statements on social media and find examples in the comments section of these posts that are in support of and against the organization's shared statement to compare and discuss. Students will present their examples of negative and positive comments to the organization's activist statements on social media to the class and discuss why the organization's statement is successful or not, based upon the comments. (Was the statement deemed inauthentic? Did commenters see it as organizational bandwagon activism? Did the organization either not have or forget to mention potential actions to support message? Was it not aligned with the organization's stated values?)
2. Then, ask students to craft responses to both positive and negative

social media comments on the organization's social media activism content.

Evaluation:

- Student understanding of concepts will be demonstrated by their contributions to the discussion.
- The in-class writing exercise (Activity #2) will be peer reviewed and edited, and then their responses will be shared with the class for analysis and discussion.

How assessment of student learning will be met:

Awareness

- Learn the differences between bandwagon activism and social activism.
- Learn how to humanize messages with authentic language and empathy.

Understanding

- Given social media content, distinguish the differences between bandwagon activism and corporate social activism.
- Understand the effective use of empathy to humanize an organization's response to negative or hostile comments on the organization's social justice statements.

Application

- Analyze existing social activism content on popular social media platforms to determine appropriate strategies for different channels.
- Improve writing skills and humanizing messages through written responses to positive, negative/hostile, and/or emotional comments on social media platforms.

Case Study

A useful case study for organizational issue activism focuses on Ben & Jerry's ice cream, and their social justice/Black Lives Matter (BLM) activism on social media. They are unabashed in their beliefs and stances, take proactive action to support those beliefs, and encourage people to both agree and disagree with them on social media.

Some of the actions they have taken to support their statements include creating the Ben & Jerry's Foundation (launched 1985), which distributes money (\$2.8 million in 2018) to support grassroots organizing for social and environmental justice. They have also created multiple new flavors to support their issues, including a Colin Kaepernick Change the Whirled Non-Dairy pint.

Additionally, Ben & Jerry's supports issues that are relevant and important to their customers, employees, and leadership, allowing for a variety of issues and ways to support the causes. In 2016, when Ben & Jerry's announced their support for BLM on social media, they had the largest reaction in their organizational history, including everything from cheering them on to announcing the customer was boycotting their product (Ben & Jerry's, 2016; Ciszek & Logan, 2018).

Rob Michalak, Ben & Jerry's Director of Social Mission Special Projects, said that "We respect that some people will have a set of values that are meaningful and important to them, and we may lose some customers. But what we've also learned is that those who share those values are more deeply loyal" (Forbes, 2020, para. 8). Fans on Facebook (one of their main platforms) support this: "I think I just need to buy another deep freezer for all the ice cream I'm gonna have to buy to counter everyone that claims

they are gonna quit buying Ben & Jerry's because wait for it...they speak out on injustice.”

Finally, Ben & Jerry's believes that “purpose-driven companies really are the companies of the future; they're profitable and more sustainable” (Forbes, 2020, para. 12). This belief, along with the idea that it's simply the right thing to do, is clear through all their messaging, and that confidence is perhaps unique to their presentation and statements.

Ben & Jerry's offers an interesting perspective on making social justice statements on social media, and they back up their words with clear and concrete actions. They also have a fun and yet sincere approach to engaging publics in conversation on social media. These qualities combine to make them an excellent case study for this module and for student learning.

References

- Ben & Jerry's. (2016, October 6). Why Black lives matter. *Benjerry.com*. Retrieved from <https://www.benjerry.com/whats-new/2016/why-black-lives-matter/>
- Bhagwat, Y., Warren, N. L., Beck, J. T., & Watson, G. F. (2020). Corporate Sociopolitical Activism and Firm Value. *Journal of Marketing*, 84(5), 1-21. doi.org/10.1177/0022242920937000
- Bhattarai, A. (2019, September 3). ‘The status quo is unacceptable’: Walmart will stop selling some ammunition and exit the handgun market. *The Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2019/09/03/status-quo-is-unacceptable-walmart-will-stop-selling-some-ammunition-exit-handgun-market/>
- Chatterji, A. K., & Toffel, M. W. (2018). The New CEO Activists. *Harvard Business Review*, 96(1), 78-89.

- Ciszek, E., & Logan, N. (2018). Challenging the dialogic promise: How Ben & Jerry's support for Black Lives Matter fosters dissensus on social media. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 30(3), 115-127. doi: 10.1080/1062726X.2018.1498342
- Dodd, M. D., & Supa, D. W. (2014). Conceptualizing and Measuring "Corporate Social Advocacy" Communication: Examining the Impact on Corporate Financial Performance. *Public Relations Journal*, 8(3), 2-23.
- Freberg, K. (2019). *Social Media for Strategic Communication: Creative Strategies and Research-Based Applications*. Sage.
- Hambrick, D. C., & Wowak, A. J. (2019) CEO Sociopolitical Activism: A Stakeholder Alignment Model. *Academy of Management Review*, 46(1). Doi.org/10.5465/amr.2018.0084
- Kang, C., Germann, F., & Grewal, R. (2016). Washing Away Your Sins? Corporate Social Responsibility, Corporate Social Irresponsibility, and Firm Performance. *Journal of Marketing*, 80(2), 59-79.
- Luttrell, R. (2016). *Social Media: How to Engage, Share, and Connect*. (2nd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Marquis, C. (2020, June 9). Why Ben & Jerry's won't stay silent on white supremacy--or other social justice issues. *Forbes*. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/christophermarquis/2020/06/09/why-ben--jerrys-wont-stay-silent-on-white-supremacy-or-other-social-justice-issues/?sh=39e3d3016f07>
- McWilliams, A. (2015). Corporate social responsibility, in *Wiley Encyclopedia of Management*, 1-4.
- Olkkonen, L., & Jääskeläinen, J. (2019). Corporate Activism: Exploring Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Communication. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 2019(17350).
- Oxford Dictionary (2020). Activism, retrieved on Nov. 15, 2021 from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/activism>

- Paul, K. (2020, June 9). Amazon says 'Black Lives Matter'. But the company has deep ties to policing. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/jun/09/amazon-black-lives-matter-police-ring-jeff-bezos>
- Sakoui, A., & Faughnder, R. (2020, June 1). Solidarity, or joining the 'bandwagon'? Some corporate activism backfires amid protests. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/business/story/2020-06-01/solidarity-joining-bandwagon-some-corporate-activism-backfires-amid-protests>
- Smith, M. F. (2005). Activism. In R. L. Heath (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of public relations* (pp. 5-10). Sage
- Tensley, B. (2019, September 4). What Walmart's gun control move says about America. *CNN*. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/04/politics/walmart-guns-real-america/index.html>