

The 'woke-ism' debate in brand communications: Navigating inclusivity in a polarised world

The role of 'woke-ism' in brand communications has never been more contentious, as companies navigate a cultural landscape marked by deep divisions. The term 'woke' – once a call for awareness of social justice – has evolved into a politically charged concept, dividing public opinion and influencing corporate strategies. In light of President Trump's recent executive order recognising only two genders – male and female – brands now face a critical challenge: balancing inclusivity with shifting societal expectations.

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As a first-world leading country, the United States often sets the trajectory for global trends, themes, and actions. While some nations and businesses may not immediately follow suit, this shift might be something to anticipate and prepare for, as its ripple effects could shape international perspectives on woke-ism.

Defining woke-ism

Originally rooted in Black American vernacular English (BAVE), the term 'woke' was synonymous with social consciousness, particularly around racial and systemic injustices. Over time, its meaning expanded to encompass advocacy for marginalised communities, including LGBTQ+ rights, gender equality, and climate justice. However, as cultural narratives shifted, so did the perception of woke-ism:

- **Positive connotations:** Advocates argue that being 'woke' fosters empathy, social justice, and progressive change, helping brands connect with younger, socially aware audiences.
- **Negative connotations:** Critics contend that woke-ism has led to performative activism, cancel culture, and ideological rigidity, alienating population segments.
- **Neutral/context-dependent:** The term has become politicised, with its interpretation depending on the user and the context in which it is employed.

The gender debate: Impact on marketing and PR

The recognition of gender diversity in the US has fluctuated over time. Previously, up to 74 gender identities were acknowledged, reflecting a broad spectrum of self-identification. These included:

1. Agender, 2. Androgyne, 3. Androgynous, 4. Bigender, 5. Cisgender, 6. Cis Female, 7. Cis Male, 8. Cis Man, 9. Cis woman, 10. Cisgender female, 11. Cisgender male, 12. Cisgender man, 13. Cisgender woman, 14. Female to male (FTM), 15. Gender fluid, 16. Gender nonconforming, 17. Gender questioning, 18. Gender variant, 19. Genderqueer, 20. Intersex, 21. Male to female (MTF), 22. Neither, 23. Neutrois, 24. Non-binary, 25. Other, 26. Pangender, 27. Trans, 28. Trans female, 29. Trans male, 30. Trans man, 31. Trans person, 32. Trans woman, 33. Transfeminine, 34. Transgender, 35. Transgender female, 36. Transgender male, 37. Transgender man, 38. Transgender person, 39. Transgender woman, 40. Transmasculine, 41. Two-spirit (and additional culturally specific identities).

With the executive order limiting gender recognition to only two, brands must reassess their inclusivity policies, marketing strategies, and corporate messaging. This decision could have far-reaching effects on how businesses engage with consumers, particularly younger generations who prioritise diversity and inclusivity in brand relationships.

The perception of DEI in a post-woke era

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives have become foundational pillars for modern businesses. However, the anti-woke movement raises concerns about whether DEI efforts will be scaled back, rebranded, or abandoned altogether. For marketers and PR professionals, this presents a strategic conundrum:

- **The risk of alienation:** Brands that overtly support gender diversity and broader social justice issues may face backlash from conservative audiences who view such stances as overly progressive.
- **The challenge of authenticity:** Companies engaging in DEI efforts must ensure their initiatives are meaningful and not perceived as virtue signalling. Consumers quickly detect inauthenticity, which can erode trust and brand loyalty.
- **The shift in corporate strategy:** Some organisations may take a more neutral stance on gender politics to avoid controversy, focusing instead on broader, less polarising inclusivity efforts.

The trajectory of society: The impact of woke-ism

The debate over woke-ism is not just about branding – it reflects broader societal changes. As businesses adapt to evolving cultural expectations, several potential outcomes emerge:

1. Brands will be forced to pick a side or risk alienating one demographic while appealing to another.
2. With governments shaping gender and social policies, companies must navigate compliance while balancing consumer sentiment.
3. Social responsibility is no longer a choice but an expectation. Businesses must craft nuanced messaging that aligns with their values while managing public perception.
4. Despite political shifts, inclusivity remains a fundamental aspect of corporate identity. The challenge lies

in how brands implement it in sustainable and culturally relevant ways.

Navigating the Woke Divide

As woke-ism continues to be both celebrated and condemned, brands must tread carefully. The key to success lies in understanding audience sentiment, aligning corporate values with authentic action, and maintaining a balanced approach to inclusivity. Rather than reacting impulsively to political shifts, businesses should develop long-term strategies that reflect their brand ethos while fostering meaningful engagement with diverse audiences.

At Brandfundi, we believe brand communications should reflect trends and shape meaningful conversations that drive societal progress. The challenge is not about choosing sides but fostering dialogue that bridges divides. Brands that prioritise meaningful connections, inclusivity, and authenticity will continue to build trust and remain relevant in a dynamic cultural landscape.

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