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No Safe Topics

Multistakeholder insights on the relationship between businesses and societal issues today
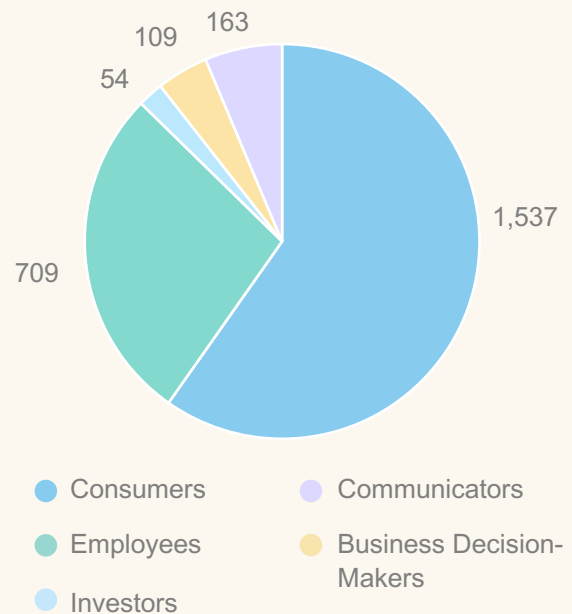
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There are no safe topics for CEOs today – but not speaking up may do more harm than good

Stakeholders from all sides continue to press corporate leaders to take a position on a range of societal issues, but leaders find themselves boxed in by conflicting expectations.

In the last five years it has become increasingly common to see CEOs take public positions on societal issues and events to demonstrate they, and the companies they lead, are in touch, engaged and empathetic. Which issues require or benefit from executive acknowledgement is still up for debate, but in the multistakeholder landscape in which all companies operate, balancing the positions, preferences and expectations of diverse stakeholder groups makes the determinations of when, how and to whom that much more complicated.

To bring some insight and clarity to the ongoing challenge of multistakeholder issue engagement, Myriant by United Minds, in collaboration with the USC Annenberg School fielded a survey in February-March 2024 exploring the question of whether and how companies should continue to take public, or even internal, positions on potentially divisive societal issues from sustainability, DE&I, and reproductive rights, to the 2024 election and climate change.

Legend:
- Consumers
- Employees
- Investors
- Communicators
- Business Decision-Makers

(Pie chart values: 1,537; 709; 54; 109; 163)

Our survey reached U.S. consumers, employed individuals, investors, business decision-makers ("BDMs") and communicators. Across these stakeholders, we found CEOs are likely to continue to face challenges when it comes to multistakeholder issue engagement. The range of diversity in preference and opinion makes it difficult to strike a tone that appeals to and appeases all of a company's stakeholders – some of whom would rather you didn't speak up at all. And yet, because many stakeholders, especially employees and consumers, are willing to act on their positions, NOT speaking up, and not having a data-driven command of the issues and strategies that best position the organization, can do considerable harm to the business, its reputation, and trusted relationships with key constituents.

The following four key insights from our research make the case.

1 *Personal interests drive expectations.*

We often take for granted that stakeholders' differing perspectives of what's important are based on personal values, needs and interests. But, in a list of 17 topics, when asked how important it is for companies to take a public stance, the top five rankings are surprisingly consistent across groups.

Rank	Consumers	Employees	Investors	Business Decision-makers	Comms Professionals
#1	The U.S. Economy	Mental Health	The U.S. Economy	The U.S. Economy	Climate Change and Sustainability
#2	Mental Health	The U.S. Economy	Climate Change and Sustainability	Climate Change and Sustainability	Racism and Race Relations
#3	Racism and Race Relations	Racism and Race Relations	Tie: Mental Health and Union Rights	Misinformation and Disinformation	Mental Health
#4	Mis/Disinformation	Diversity, Equity and Inclusion		Tie: Mental Health and Racism / Race Relations	Mis/Disinformation
#5	Gun Violence	Union Workers' Rights	Using and Regulation of Generative AI		The U.S. Economy

Beyond the economy, which is top of mind for most, employees, consumers, and investors all singled out mental health as an important issue for companies to take a position on. The reasons may be both personal and societal. As the U.S. continues to fully emerge from the pandemic, as Gen Z enters the workforce with a greater focus on wellness and work-life balance, and as the hybrid workplace continues to evolve, 72% of consumers and 64% of employees say mental health is an issue they'd most like to see companies take a lead on, in both action and engagement.

Looking at consumers more specifically, we find key gaps between what they view is important, and where business decision-makers choose instead to focus.

Racism and race relations, union workers' rights and immigration are three areas consumers flag as important, but CEOs and business are often more hesitant to take public positions on for fear of offending or alienating a particular stakeholder group.

(1) Business decision-makers are defined as executives with a primary decision-making role at their company and are at the C-Suite, President/CEO, Owner, or VP/AVP/SVP level.
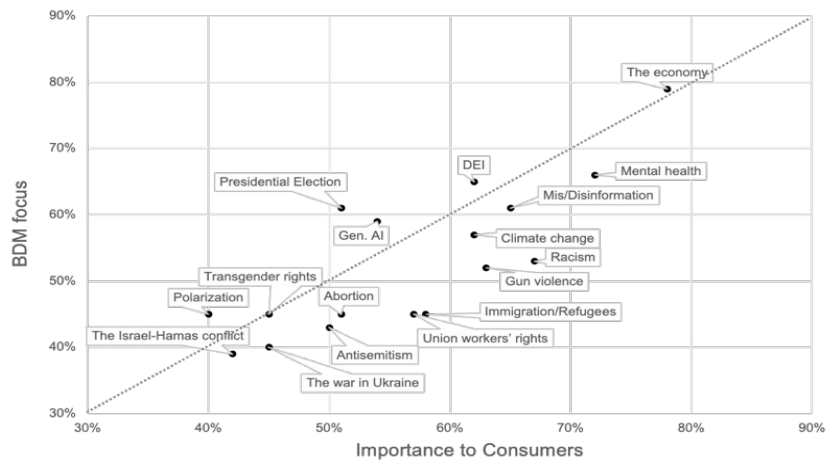
In the professional realm, investors, business decision-makers and communications professionals rank climate change and sustainability as a top topic. This is likely born of their need to understand and base decisions on the long-term risks and opportunities climate change poses for many companies and industries. The insight is reinforced when juxtaposed with the fact that a full 78% of business-decision makers and 60% of investors believe companies will continue to invest in ESG over the next five years. Together these data points signal an expectation that a company's positions and actions connected to ESG-related issues are to remain front and center over the long-term. The expectation however runs counter to recent trends where ESG-focused communications and thought leadership are being deprioritized.

A broader point may be that while the economy, mental health and sustainability are complicated to communicate, on their surface they are not inherently controversial – everyone agrees to their general importance. Notably absent from these stakeholder rankings are more polarizing topics such as the current conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, and social/cultural issues – social justice, racism, transgender and reproductive rights – that continue to be vigorously debated and fought over in American communities and political arenas. While the survey data shows expectations for leaders to take public positions on these issues undiminished, we've nevertheless seen a slow retreat. CEOs today are overall less willing to publicly engage and more likely to abstain from taking the strong leadership positions many declared as recently as a few years ago.

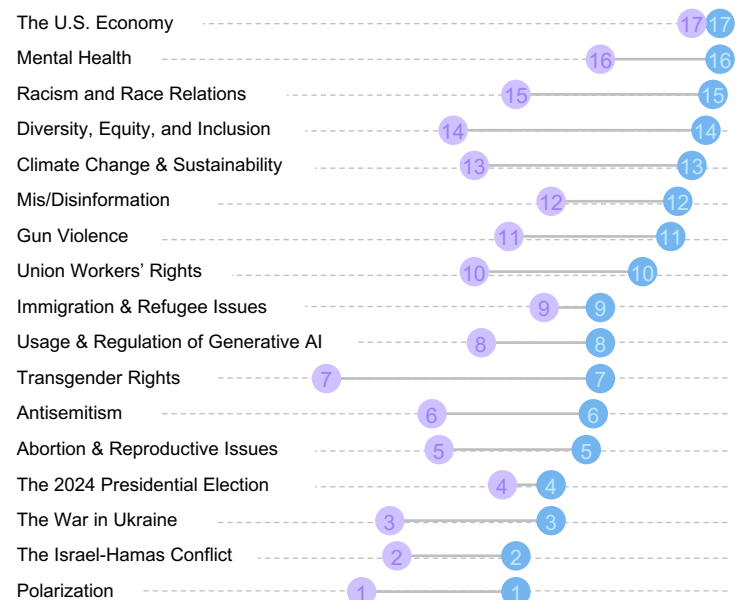## 2 Political affiliation colors receptivity

When we move from interests and values to positions and opinions, the biggest gaps in stakeholder preference around issue engagement are unsurprisingly partisan. Political affiliation not only impacts which stance survey respondents want a company to take, but the degree to which they want a company to take a stance at all.

Survey respondents identifying as Democrat believe more strongly in the importance for companies to speak out publicly on issues, while those identifying as Republican are less likely to believe the same. The most significant partisan gaps are found around racism and race relations (81% Dem. vs. 53% Rep.), DE&I (80% Dem. vs. 44% Rep.) and transgender rights (65% Dem. vs. 26% Rep.). The two groups are most closely aligned around the U.S. economy.

Walking a neutral line between political positions – especially when engaging employees – often feels perilous for CEOs and communicators alike. Doing this well requires context, consistency and a deeper understanding not

Importance for companies to take a stand on issues by political party (Consumers):

● Republican ● Democrat

Issue	Republican	Democrat
The U.S. Economy	17	17
Mental Health	16	16
Racism and Race Relations	15	15
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	14	14
Climate Change & Sustainability	13	13
Mis/Disinformation	12	12
Gun Violence	11	11
Union Workers' Rights	10	10
Immigration & Refugee Issues	9	9
Usage & Regulation of Generative AI	8	8
Transgender Rights	7	7
Antisemitism	6	6
Abortion & Reproductive Issues	5	5
The 2024 Presidential Election	4	4
The War in Ukraine	3	3
The Israel-Hamas Conflict	2	2
Polarization	1	1

only of a particular issue and the sentiments around it, but of the audience itself. Perhaps most critically is to understand the relative strength (and weaknesses) of a company's and CEO's relationship with those audiences.

3 *Stakeholders are quick to react, and to act*

In today's hyper partisan, hyper speed media and social media environment, it can feel like nearly all stakeholders are quick to react and equally quick to publicly voice their displeasure. From recent investor pressure on universities, to ever-faster moving consumer sentiment, the onus is increasingly on the C-suite and marketing and communications teams, to find new ways to look around corners and remain informed and prepared to engage on issues likely to evoke strong emotion, action or reaction from key constituents. Our survey confirms this.

One in three consumers say they would boycott a company whose values don't align with theirs, and almost half say they're likely to share opinions with friends and family. This is true across generations, with some surprising nuances. By a wide margin, Baby Boomers (b.1946-64) are more likely to boycott a company taking a position counter to their own (41%) and are most likely to share opinions with friends and family (53%). Gen X (b.1965-80) is nearly as likely as Millennials (b. 1981-96) and Gen Z (b.1997-2012) to express opinions on social media or through negative online reviews.

Likelihood of consumer action when they disagree with a company's stance

Express my opinions to friends and family
- Gen Z: 44%
- Millennials: 45%
- Gen X: 46%
- Boomers: 53%
- Silent: 47%

Boycott the company
- Gen Z: 33%
- Millennials: 24%
- Gen X: 34%
- Boomers: 41%
- Silent: 31%

Leave a negative rating or review about the company's product or services
- Gen Z: 22%
- Millennials: 26%
- Gen X: 26%
- Boomers: 29%
- Silent: 24%

Express my opinions on social media
- Gen Z: 27%
- Millennials: 29%
- Gen X: 26%
- Boomers: 18%
- Silent: 20%

Legend:
- Gen Z
- Millennials
- Gen X
- Boomers
- Silent

Inside the workplace, employee tendencies, while less pronounced than consumers, are still prevalent, with a similar picture emerging around workers who disagree with a stance their company takes: 18% say they would take public actions (protest or petition) and 20% would take to social media. Even more troubling than public-facing actions impacting reputation is the suggestion that 27% of employees say they would look for another job if they disagreed with a company's stance, and over one third would speak up about their concerns with co-workers.

Keeping employees in place, engaged and focused on performance means listening and engaging in real time – measuring employee engagement can no longer be an isolated annual exercise. The companies that do this well are reimagining and rebuilding employee listening strategies to take the best that digital technology and AI have to offer and applying them to the task of enabling a steady stream of insights and feedback sent directly to the C-suite, and from which human capital and strategies, and indeed business decisions are built and executed.

4 The expectation to act is high; the confidence in business' ability to have an impact, low

In the first three insights, we largely focused on a company's positions carried through communications. But our survey also showed the expectation for companies to take action is pronounced. 64% of survey respondents say companies have a responsibility to play a role in addressing society's problems. From there, they also agree the positions an organization takes must be reinforced with action: employees (64%), consumers (61%) and investors (at a whopping 96%)

Consumers 61%

Employees 64%

Comms Prof 85%

Investors 96%

BDMs 72%
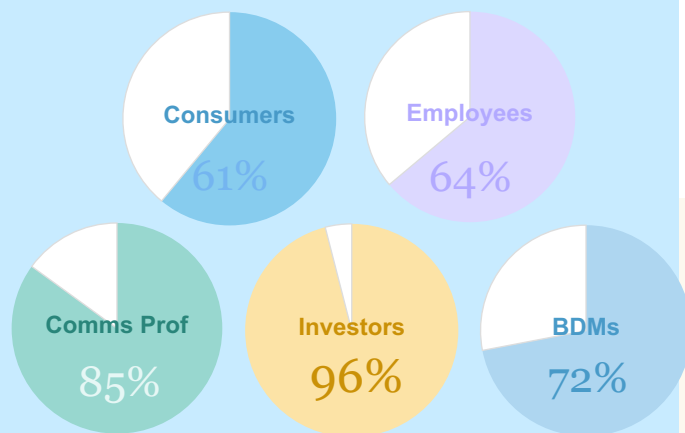
While stakeholders believe in the need for action and responsibility on the part of businesses to address societal problems, only 13% of respondents across stakeholder groups believe businesses and corporations today are playing a positive role, and only 18% of employees feel that statement to be true. The stakeholder group with the greatest confidence in business' role in addressing societal challenges? Investors at 41%.

The gap between expectations for responsibility and perceptions of positive impact may be attributed in part to communications. Only 32% of employees and 20% of consumers in our survey ranked themselves very knowledgeable about company positions, and by association their actions, on issues. Companies may not be getting the credit they deserve for taking a stance and taking specific action. Leaders themselves may also be thinking they're landing the message better than they are – they rank
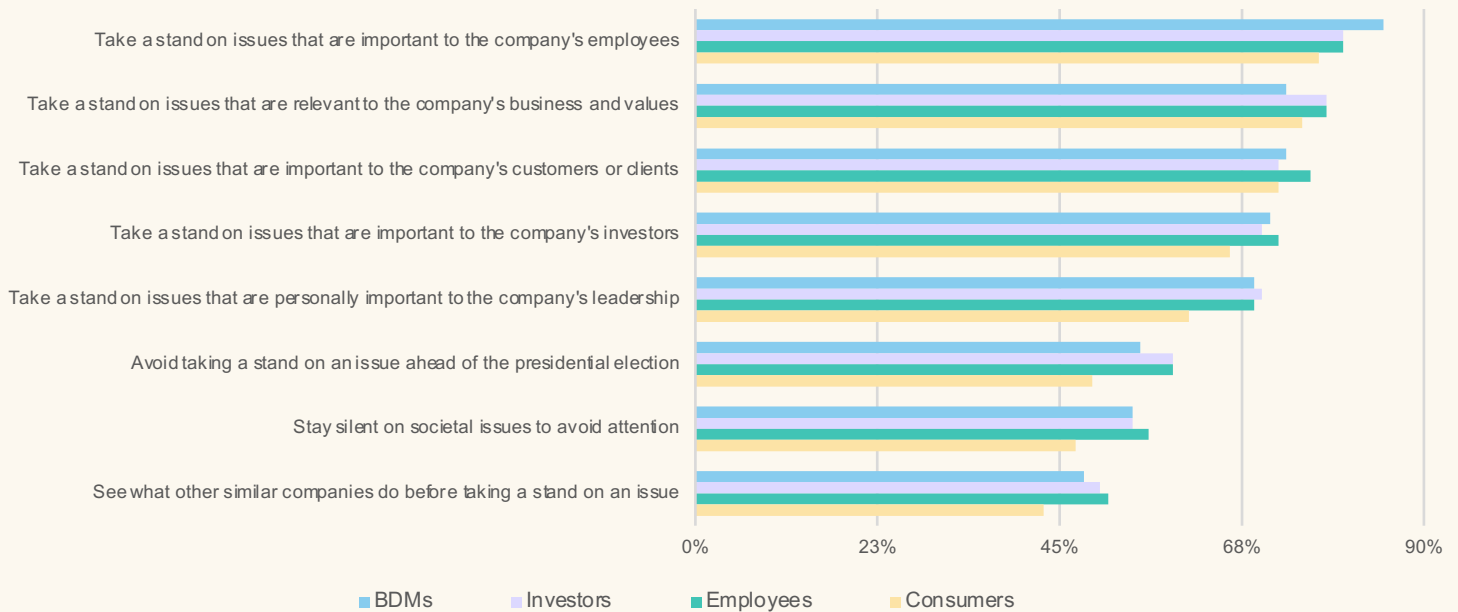
37% of their consumers and 48% of their employees as very knowledgeable about their company's positions.

Consistent stakeholder engagement and education around a company's actions, investments, and positions has been shown to cultivate the advocacy, commitment and goodwill necessary to ensure brand and corporate loyalty and a better return on investment for a company's actions and investments.

The upshot – what this means for CEOs today

Expectations for companies and their leaders to play an active and vocal role in addressing the challenges we face as a nation and as a society aren't going away. As we get deeper into the election cycle, CEO's will continue to feel pressure to take positions and drive positive actions, especially as it relates to workforce equity and well being. When asked to weigh in on this very issue, survey respondents across stakeholder groups felt strongest about CEOs taking a stand on issues important to the company's employees, outranking business, customer, investor, and staying silent.

Percentage of each stakeholder group that would provide CEOs with each of the following pieces of advice

Take a stand on issues that are important to the company's employees

Take a stand on issues that are relevant to the company's business and values

Take a stand on issues that are important to the company's customers or clients

Take a stand on issues that are important to the company's investors

Take a stand on issues that are personally important to the company's leadership

Avoid taking a stand on an issue ahead of the presidential election

Stay silent on societal issues to avoid attention

See what other similar companies do before taking a stand on an issue

0%   23%   45%   68%   90%

■ BDMs   ■ Investors   ■ Employees   ■ Consumers

Knowing the important issues for employees, and across the multistakeholder universe, starts and ends with listening. The tools and capabilities that enable us to know our audiences – what's important to them and when it is critical to engage – is evolving and advancing rapidly with the ability to build and apply targeted stakeholder insights now table stakes. Tech-enabled tools and generative AI are already changing how businesses understand and make decisions not only about where and when to take a public position, but on where and how to grow, evolve and transform their organizations for the future.

Mining the right insights through technology is a science, understanding and acting on those insights is an art. Leaders and their organizations need to master the ability to see and connect the dots across a crowded and noisy ecosystem, using a multistakeholder prism to identify areas of common interest and of stark divergence. These become the points of departure for engagement and decision-making. It's a long game to be sure but critical to the sustained performance and competitive advantage of every organization.