

THE POLITICS OF BRAND PERCEPTION: 5 STEPS FOR BUSINESS LEADERS MANAGING POLITICAL OUTCRY

Insights

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It doesn't take much these days for a brand or organization to become the target of political outrage from employees or the general public. A comment from leadership, an advertising campaign, or even an employee's social media post can trigger a wave of public reaction that, at best, distracts from your business's mission – and at worst can have significant impacts on your bottom line. When this happens, the goal is not to "win the argument," it's to preserve credibility, calm the worst of the storm, and maintain trust with key audiences and stakeholders. Here are five steps every business should consider when responding to politically oriented backlash.

Note: Fisher Phillips' *Reputation and Crisis Management Team* assist your organization with a specifically tailored plan and response to any situation related to brand perception.

1. Assess Whether the Risk is Real

When politics enter the picture, perception often outweighs precision. Your response must be appropriate to the risk posed by the situation. Over-responding to a relatively minor situation can do just as much damage as failing to respond to a serious one. Evaluate the situation using three key lenses:

- **Reputational:** Does the issue strike at your brand's core values or mission?
- **Operational:** Could it affect your ability to serve customers, retain employees, or meet contractual

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obligations

- **Legal/Regulatory:** Are there any statements or actions that could create compliance or liability exposure?

Reviewing the incident through these filters will help you separate a short-term social media flare-up from a true crisis that requires a coordinated response.

2. Pause Before You Post – But Not Too Long

When emotions are running high, the worst response is a rushed one. Even well-meaning statements can deepen the divide if they sound defensive, inconsistent, or tone-deaf. Before issuing a public response:

- **Gather the facts:** Understand what is being said, where it is being said, and by whom.
- **Identify the key audiences:** Is it your customers, employees, ownership, regulators, courts, or the public?
- **Activate your response team:** Your crisis team should include leadership, communications, operations, and legal counsel, at a minimum. You should build this team before the crisis hits.

A short holding statement is often better than a premature apology or explanation. However, many companies also lose the opportunity to shape the narrative by overcorrecting and not quickly releasing enough accurate information. Make sure your team works to balance these competing pressures.

3. Manage Your Internal Stakeholders Before Addressing Outside Relationships

When political issues erupt, internal trust is your foundation. Employees, shareholders, franchisees, and other key relationships should hear directly from leadership before they read about the organization's stance online.

- Explain the situation factually, not emotionally.
- Remember to distinguish facts from opinions.
- Provide employees with key talking points (or guidance not to engage).



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- Reinforce that differing personal views are respected within the organization's culture.

This kind of internal alignment prevents mixed messages and protects morale. It also empowers grass roots supporters – who are often more effective at building credibility than your corporate messaging apparatus.

4. Respond to Values, Not Volume

Political backlash often comes from people who never intended to be your customers in the first place. Resist the temptation to respond to every critic. Instead, anchor your communication around your organization's values and audience.

- Consider the impacts that taking explicit stands on divisive political topics can have both now and in the future.
- Reaffirm what your organization stands for and how those principles guide your decisions.
- Speak in clear, nonpartisan terms that emphasize professionalism, respect, and purpose without alienating potential customer demographics.
- Avoid language, hashtags, or slogans that ratchet up the temperature – even those that might appeal to your target markets.

Think about the long-term: Could your statements now harm you in the future if the partisan winds should change? Do your long-term stakeholders want to see you in constant engagement on political issues or are they more inclined to value steadiness, reliability, and consistency?

5. Plan for the Long Tail

Public outcry may subside in days, but the digital evidence of your response will remain online forever. After the immediate noise fades, you should conduct a post-crisis review that addresses the following questions:

- How did your response perform across various messaging and social media channels?
- Did you see shifts in customer sentiment or employee engagement?

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Trump Administration Resource Center for Employers

- What should your crisis communications plan include next time?

A politically charged incident can become a learning opportunity enabling organizations to refine policies around employee speech, social media, and brand alignment.

Bonus content:

If you are unsure how to handle the workplace-related aspects springing from an employee's social media post or other communications statements, review our latest Insight on the subject: [What Employees Can – and Can't – Do About Employee Speech in a Volatile Climate](#)

Conclusion

Make sure you are subscribed to [Fisher Phillips' Insight System](#) to get the most up-to-date information on the issues discussed in this insight. If you have questions about these issues, please contact your Fisher Phillips attorney, the authors of this Insight, or any attorney on our [Reputation and Crisis Management Team](#).