

Opinion: Business is increasingly political; here's how to embrace it

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In the wake of the Capitol insurrection on January 6th, I've worked with several organizations to issue statements about the events. As a communications professional, I often guide leaders of universities, schools, nonprofits and businesses in what to say when something of importance occurs — and even whether or not to say something at all.

As an entrepreneur myself, I know the reasons I got into business were not to take a stand or otherwise weigh in on politics. But as a leader in an industry, a community or even just a company of individuals, I've stepped into a role that others watch and there is a responsibility in that type of leadership that forces us to speak up.



Most people don't get into business to become political. In fact, they may see their daily work and their political leanings as wholly separate entities.

But we don't move through the world in segments. We are all of the things we think, feel and believe, all of the time. And when matters of great importance thrust into the spotlight — like systemic racial inequity, Americans storming the seat of democracy bearing Nazi symbols and Confederate flags, or a global pandemic claiming the lives of hundreds of thousands of Americans — people in positions of power must speak up and take a stand.

We can say business is not political, but look at the reactions of major corporations in the wake of January 6th who withdrew funding from politicians who sympathized with the insurrectionists! Those businesses — Marriott, Walmart, Hallmark, MasterCard, American Express, Dow, Blue Cross Blue Shield — with far reach and global renown, are making a statement that holds sway. Money talks — and withholding campaign contributions because of actions (or inaction) is a loud and clear message.

So the role of business might be powerful in the political realm. Perhaps it is incumbent on all of us in business, large or small, to use our voices to lead.

I teach people how to market and promote their work. I teach them to create a brand story that connects with consumers, to build business by building relationships, to have mutual benefit in every transaction. In that realm of marketing with meaning, one's conscience plays a starring role in business decisions. What you do, the words you use, whether you stay silent or speak out immediately after something occurs, all of this comes together in the form of your leadership persona in indelible ways.

People want to work with you — or don't. People want to contract with you — or not. We think by not getting political in business, we are pacifying everyone, being all things to all people, when in reality we are nothing to no one.

So many companies create corporate values that they proudly exhibit. But if they don't live by them, what good are they?

You don't stop being you when you sit down in your office chair and switch on your computer. Those factors that propel you to do the work that matters also inform how you vote — and we don't just vote in the polls.

We vote with our actions and our words, our purchases and our boycotts. Every social media post. Every website page of content. Every sparkling image shared, every video recorded.

Even when you are off the clock, people are watching. Such is the way of 21st century business and living. They are one and the same, interlocking, interweaving. You can hardly hide in this 24/7 culture. And while we can shut off the rhetoric of those we don't like by blocking, unfriending, unfollowing or otherwise ignoring, it's still happening all around us and we must take part or live with the consequences of staying silent.

Most people don't get into business to become political. But they end up there nevertheless, and what they do next can determine their long-term success or their slinking away in shame. You may not want to make a statement on recent political events — or any political events — but if you don't, you will be judged just the same.

So the best leadership approach you can take is to accept the mantle of meaning and make a difference by choosing your words carefully and sharing them widely. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

Lynne Golodner focuses on Marketing with Meaning through her companies Your People LLC and the Make Meaning Movement. She is also host of the Make Meaning Podcast.