

Commentary: Politics will be judged, whether you stay silent or not

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On Jan. 6th, I live-streamed CNN while trying to work. I grew distracted as rioters spidered up the Capitol walls. I groped for words, wondering how to make sense of what I was seeing.

It felt far away and yet very near. As everything unfolded beyond the setting sun, words swirled in my head, barely forming sentences.

The next morning, I clicked back into gear and messaged a client. "Would you like my help creating a statement about yesterday?"

The client took a while to respond, processing. Surely, they had to say something, but what? Were they speaking to their board? Customers? Staff? Industry? The public? Should they respond immediately, or take time to marinate the message?

I reached out to other clients, posing the same question, tweaking the message for each unique industry and audience, assessing the people who turn to them for guidance. Each embraced the necessity of saying something, in their own way.

Every time something explodes on the national or global stage, I help people find the right words to address it. Last year, I helped clients write statements in response to the murder of George Floyd, Black Lives Matter marches in their communities, vitriolic election politics, the raging pandemic. I guide business and educational leaders on what to say — and whether to say anything at all.

Speaking out comes naturally to me because I did not set out to be an entrepreneur. I began my career as a writer, seeking to say things that needed saying. But then, venturing into business, I wondered — was it my place? Weren't my personal politics private? Or did I have a responsibility to chime in when controversial or inaccurate things emerged?

You don't have to lead a multimillion-dollar, multinational corporation to be an impactful leader. If you lead a company or community, people look to you for guidance. There is a responsibility

that comes with leadership that we cannot ignore. Even when it's uncomfortable, people in power must speak to truth.

People do business with people. Businesses depend on people to grow and thrive and stay alive. And people are impacted by words, actions, and movements. We are relentlessly intertwined, whether we like it or not.

When the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting happened in 2012, I was at work, nose deep in writing press releases and creating marketing strategies. My children were 6, 9 and 10. An employee with kids of similar ages came into my office, ashen-faced and wide-eyed. "Did you hear what happened?" she said.

We wept in the conference room, as mothers and as women. It was impossible to leave that at the door to our office. And I don't think we should have.

We don't move through life in segments. We are our thoughts, feelings and beliefs, all of the time. When urgent issues burst forth — like systemic racism, violent insurrection, or a global public health crisis claiming the lives of nearly half a million Americans — people in positions of power must speak.

In the wake of Jan. 6, big brands made a collective statement by withdrawing funding from politicians who sympathized with or encouraged the insurrection. Marriott, Walmart, Hallmark, MasterCard, American Express, Dow, Blue Cross Blue Shield, to name a few. And people are paying attention.

I teach people how to market with meaning. I urge them to ask "why" they do what they do, "why" their customers come to them. Business is a relationship between company and clientele.

We build business by building relationships, by realizing that mutual benefit transcends transaction. To build a lasting business, you have to care about your customers.

People choose to engage with you not only because of what you offer, but also for what you represent. You don't stop being you when you enter the office. The values that propel you to do work that matters also inform how you vote — and we don't just vote in the polls.

Even off the clock, people are watching — especially if you post on social media, personal life alongside professional wins. We cannot hide in a 24/7 culture.

You may not want to make a statement on current events, but if you don't, you will be judged anyway. People will patronize your business — or avoid it — regardless.

So take a stand. Speak up and speak out. Be brave. Don't shed your integrity at the office door. Be a force for a better tomorrow.

After all, we won't be remembered by individual transactions, by which clients left and which clients stayed. We will be remembered by the legacy we build, and the platform we champion, which comes from a lifetime of staying true to the values we lead with.