

2023 Insights Report on Corporate Social Advocacy

THE ARTHUR W. PAGE CENTER
— *for integrity in public communication* —



PennState
Donald P. Bellisario
College of Communications

*Report created by Holly Overton & Cassandra LC Troy
Design work by Cassandra LC Troy*

Letter to readers

Thank you for your interest in the Arthur W. Page Center and our research on corporate social advocacy.

When it comes to advocacy and socially focused initiatives, companies can no longer stay silent. Studies show that publics expect corporate leaders to take stands, speak out and be part of the discussions, if not the solutions.

Conducting effective corporate social advocacy (CSA) brings with it a daunting list of challenges, especially in an age of declining trust. Volatile social media firestorms and the rise of artificial intelligence only exacerbate the challenges. With the hope of alleviating these struggles and producing strategies for public relations professionals, we chose CSA as our research topic in 2021.

The insights report you are currently reading is the result of that research call. The projects highlighted in this book represent the incredible work of 23 scholars. Our Top 10 Insights highlight the importance of authenticity, knowing your audience, and making sure company statements align with company values. With this collection of research, we are defining integrity through a CSA lens in alignment with the [Page Principles](#).

Whether it's examining advocacy in women's sport, politicized responses to CSA, or understanding how organizations can balance the perspectives of various constituents, these projects demonstrate how successful CSA communication is dependent on ethically minded strategies.

This report is a significant part of the Page Center's mission, which is to enhance ethics and integrity in public communication. We do that by translating the work of our scholars into practical and useful information. The nine projects in this book integrate scholarly work with the needs of the profession and provide a foundational understanding of ethics for every level of communicator.

We would like to thank our Page Center scholars who not only conducted the innovative research, but also participated in creating this important publication.

Holly Overton, Ph.D.

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About the Arthur W. Page Center

The Arthur W. Page Center is an international leader in research on ethics and social responsibility. Housed in the Donald P. Bellisario College of Communications at Penn State, we are committed to the enhancement and promotion of integrity in all forms of public communication. Since 2004, we have provided \$1 million in research funding to hundreds of scholars around the world. The work of these Page Center scholars is well represented in public relations literature and related publications. It is our mission to integrate this innovative research with the needs of the profession. We do that by building ethics awareness and offering ethics education for every level of communicator.

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Top 10 Insights

Page Principle 1: Tell the truth

1

Authenticity above all.

In organization-stakeholder relationships, being comprehensively authentic is more important to enhancing trust and reducing distrust than simply avoiding hypocrisy or being transparent in CSA messaging.

Page Principle 2: Prove it with action

2

Walk the talk.

CSA statements must be accompanied by action to best reflect company values and promote favorable attitudes and behaviors among stakeholders.

3

Values must align.

Company statements and actions should reflect company values.

Page Principle 3: Listen to stakeholders

4

Expectations drive reactions.

When audiences believe that companies should advocate on issues and that companies are likely to act, CSA is viewed favorably. For lower-profile issues, only expectations about the likelihood of CSA occurring affect audience responses.

5

Know your audience.

Companies can garner favor with CSA supporters by highlighting arguments for advocacy that supporters already use and minimize backlash from CSA opponents by focusing messages on victims of an issue.

Learn more about the Page Principles at bellisario.psu.edu/page-center/about/arthur-w-page/the-page-principles

Page Principle 4: Manage for tomorrow

6

CSA is inherently political.

By taking a stance, companies make the political aspect of their corporate identities salient. One study found that 81.5% of companies took politically liberal stances while 18.5% of companies took politically conservative stances.

7

Ideological differences make a difference.

The stronger an individual's political identity, the stronger the support—or opposition.

Page Principle 5: Conduct public relations as if the whole enterprise depends on it

8

Consider a range of stakeholder groups.

Many companies engage in CSA because employees or other key stakeholders expect them to take action. In women's sport, staff members noted that advocacy was driven not only by internal objectives, but also by sponsors, fans, and athletes.

9

It's not always about fit.

Companies are prioritizing social relevancy and timeliness of issues above fit with their business focus. One study found that 78% of CSA messages were not related to a company's main business purpose.

Page Principle 6: Realize an enterprise's true character is expressed by its people

10

Create shared purpose.

Even if a company decides not to take action externally, companies should communicate internally about the topics that are important to employees. This can foster a sense of shared purpose with employees and build trust, which ultimately contributes to employee retention and loyalty.

CSA in Women's Sport: A Business Opportunity?

How do professional women's sport organizations use social media to engage in advocacy? What are key considerations for staff?

Key Findings

There was a spectrum of social media advocacy.



Organizations prioritized advocacy differently. For some, there was a **sense of responsibility** to make both online and offline advocacy a high priority. For others, advocacy should be **balanced** with other communication goals.

Staff identified three key drivers of advocacy.



Advocacy was perceived as aligned with **sponsorship goals** and **fan engagement**.

Method

- Study 1 analyzed tweets from the Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) to understand advocacy themes and issues.
- In Study 2, researchers conducted interviews with communications staff for professional women's sports teams to understand goals and challenges connected to CSA.

Takeaways

Prove it online and offline: Advocacy-related social media posts were often accompanied by in-game promotions and community engagement. Staff noted the importance of following up on statements with action to make a difference in the community.

Listen to stakeholders: Staff members noted that advocacy was driven not only by internal objectives, but also by sponsors, fans, and athletes.

Advocate authentically: Some staff perceived advocacy as inherent to women's sport because of the historic marginalization patterns. In this approach, diversity and inclusion are integrated with the growth of leagues/teams and the professionalization of women's sport.



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Eliciting Emotion in CSA Messages

Consumer reactions to advocacy can be visceral and swift, both for and against a cause. What role do specific, self-transcendent emotions play in these strong reactions?

Method

- A content analysis examined 352 CSA videos and press releases posted between 2020 and 2021 from 116 of the largest U.S. companies, based on total revenue.
- Companies were classified by industry, including: retail, health and pharmacy, energy, technology, food and beverage, manufacturing, finance and insurance, news and entertainment, and logistics.
- Researchers noted issues that CSA addressed and the kinds of content intended to evoke self-transcendent emotions.

Self-transcendent means bigger than a single individual, a company, or a product. Specific emotions include awe, compassion, and gratitude.

Takeaways

Companies are prioritizing **social relevancy and timeliness** of issues above fit with their business focus.

Issues that cover **social-related topics**, such as race/social justice, may be best served by including language demonstrating **hope** or **appreciation for excellence**.

More **politically-related topics**, such as voting rights or health statements, may find more benefit in expressing **thankfulness and gratitude**.

Key Findings

304
out of 352 CSA messages contained a self-transcendent emotional elicitor.

61% appreciation for excellence
44% hope
16% gratitude
.6% religious

78%
of messages were not related to a company's main business purpose.

95%
of messages were supportive of an issue. Very few spoke out against a topic.

46%
of messages took a stance on racial or social justice. The appreciation for excellence elicitor was most common here.

14%
of messages related to health topics.

12%
of messages addressed politics or voting.



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Audience-Centered Advocacy

How do audience expectations affect reactions to advocacy and assessments of authenticity?

Method

- **Study 1:** A survey asked participants to recall examples of CSA. Then researchers examined expectations, attitudes, and purchase intentions related to those examples. Researchers looked at two kinds of expectations:
 - **Normative expectations:** whether companies should speak up on issues
 - **Predictive expectations:** how likely it is that companies will speak up
- **Study 2:** Eight focus groups explored how consumers think about authenticity in CSA and potential consequences of inauthenticity.

Takeaways

Not all issues are equal: Standing up for some issues (e.g., social justice) may evoke more politicized controversy than other topics (e.g., climate change).

Expectations drive reactions to advocacy: When audiences believe that companies should advocate on justice issues and that companies are likely to act, CSA is viewed favorably. For lower-profile issues, only expectations about the likelihood of CSA occurring affect audience responses.

Authenticity takes effort: For CSA to be seen as authentic and beneficial, companies must be sincere and consistent with engagement, while showing a willingness to take risks.

Key Findings

People were most aware of CSA around racial equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and climate change.

Perceptions of advocacy fell into four groups:

Identity Alignment

advocacy on contentious topics that bring political identity top of mind e.g., racial equality

Legitimate Engagement

actions that audiences broadly admire on high-profile issues e.g., climate action

Divisive Practice
divisive support for lower-profile politicized issues e.g., immigration

Emergent Norms
support for uncontroversial emerging issues e.g., women's rights

Predictive expectations affected company-issue fit, issue importance, and approval of CSA stance across topics. Normative expectations only had similar effects for social justice issues.

Company-issue fit, issue importance, and approval of a CSA stance positively predicted attitudes toward the social impacts of CSA. Boycotting intentions were only determined by individuals' agreement with company stances.

Focus groups highlighted four characteristics of authentic advocacy:

Sincerity

honest advocacy

Consistency

alignment with company values and track record

Engagement

dedicated interaction with a cause and concerned stakeholders

Risk-taking

willingness to endure short-term financial or reputational losses



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Talking the Talk vs Walking the Walk

Corporate Social Advocacy can be statements or actions supporting one side of an issue. Should companies prioritize statements or actions in CSA?

Method

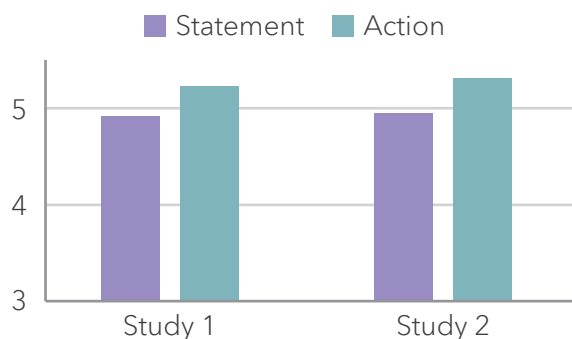
- Three studies tested effects of messages about CSA statements or actions supporting LGBTQ+ rights and abortion access.
- CSA actions took the form of changes in company employee policies, representations in company media, and policy support.

Past research has shown that CSR is better received by the public when it is backed up by actions. Statements alone can stoke skepticism. This research extends knowledge beyond CSR to CSA.


Key Findings


- Compared to statements alone, action encouraged consumer beliefs that CSA was motivated primarily by company values.
- This perception of values increased positive attitudes toward the company, intentions to speak positively about the company, and purchase intentions.


Belief that CSA is Values-Driven



Takeaways

 CSA must be seen as **values-driven** in order to garner positive responses among the public.

 This values-driven attribution can impact **attitudes and behaviors**, such as perceptions of a company, positive word-of-mouth, and purchasing.

 Company actions that communicate a **substantive commitment** to CSA include company-focused changes to a product (Study 1) and broader societally-focused actions like policy advocacy (Study 2).



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Politicized Responses to CSA

CSA initiatives are often politically divisive. They tend to attract some stakeholder groups while alienating others. How does alignment between an individual's political views and a company's politicized stance influence attitudes toward a company?

Method

- Researchers devised an **innovative computational research** approach by developing a new natural language processing algorithm to measure individuals' political ideologies using social media data.
- Focusing on **6 real-world CSA events** that occurred between 2019 and 2022, researchers cross-analyzed:
 - 1) Companies' political stances (liberal or conservative) expressed in their CSA initiatives, based on news coverage
 - 2) Sentiment scores of Twitter users' conversations about the CSA initiatives, which captured attitudes (positive, neutral, negative) toward companies
 - 3) Political ideology (liberal or conservative) of 5,181 Twitter users who talked about the CSA initiatives, based on profile information and historical tweets



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Takeaways

CSA is inherently political. By taking explicit stances, companies make the political aspect of their corporate identities salient, and the congruence between companies' and publics' identities becomes the basis for stakeholders' reactions.

The stronger an individual's ideological identity, the stronger the support (or opposition). Companies should balance positive returns via support from significant stakeholder groups and potential risks of alienating certain stakeholder groups.

Key Findings

81.5%

of companies took politically liberal stances

18.5%

of companies took politically conservative stances

Researchers created public-company identity congruence groups when companies' political stance matched individuals' ideologies.

70% of cases were congruent

30% were not

Across the six CSA events, individual Twitter users' attitudes toward the involved companies were **more favorable** when companies' political stances were congruent with users' political ideology.

Reaching Supporters & Opponents of CSA

CSA is divisive by nature. How can companies maximize support among those on both sides of an issue when taking a stand?

Method

- Researchers used two studies to test effects of CSA messages among supporters and opponents of gun control.
- **Study 1** included supporters of gun control and tested the effects of emphasizing proponent arguments or contradicting opponent arguments in a message.
- **Study 2** focused on opponents of gun control and examined the impact of highlighting different group identities within the message: victim identity versus national identity.

Key Findings: CSA Supporters

- Companies will be more successful when highlighting arguments for advocacy that supporters already use instead of contradicting talking points from opponents.
- Familiar talking points:
 - Heighten feelings of supporter identity
 - Boost positive feelings about the message and the company
 - Increase chances of customer engagement with CSA.

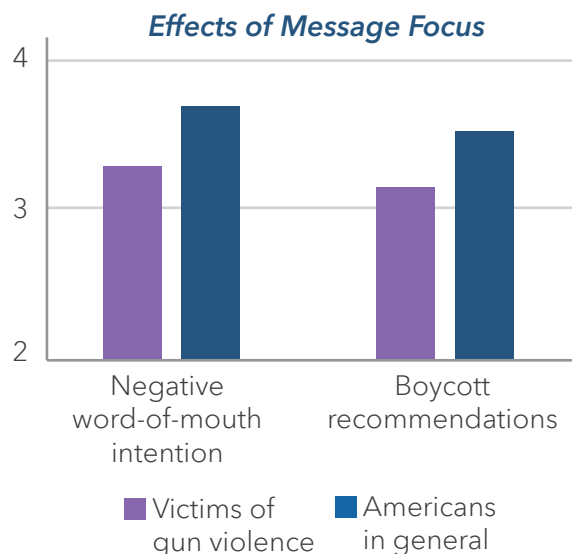
Takeaways

Shifting focus to victims impacted by a problem can make **opponents** of a stance more receptive to CSA efforts and less likely to boycott or speak poorly of a company.

On the other hand, focusing on stakeholders' **identity as advocates** and using **familiar arguments** can further rally them to support a company and its CSA.

Key Findings: CSA Opponents

- Company messages should focus on victims of an issue. This helps increase message acceptance and reduces undesirable outcomes like negative word-of-mouth and boycott recommendations.



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Proving a Commitment to Advocacy Through Leadership & Action

How can different kinds of advocacy and CEO actions work together to support positive responses to CSA?



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Background

Company commitments to a cause can take a few distinct forms:

Symbolic: Verbal statements that raise awareness about an issue.

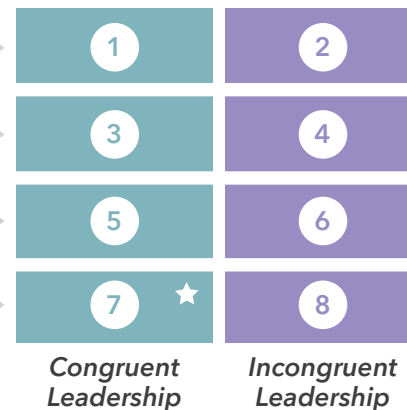
Experiential: Encouraging the public to engage in activism.

Philanthropic: Donating money to express support for a cause.

Explicit: Changing business practices to address a socio-political issue.

Method

An online experiment tested effects of eight environmental justice messages on authenticity. The most effective message is starred:



Takeaways

Get Aligned: It is crucial for brand leaders to demonstrate values consistent with their company's CSA through their own actions.

Authentic CSA Wins the Day: Consumers use CSA to judge a company's authenticity. Authentic communication is crucial for brand success.

Less Talk, More Action: Consumers want brands to take explicit action. Raising awareness about an issue is not enough.

Know Your Audience: People who are highly involved in an issue may be more receptive to an array of advocacy strategies.

A CEO's leadership is congruent when their past behavior aligns with their company's advocacy stance.

Key Findings

- CSA was rated most authentic when explicit action was combined with a track record of CEO support for environmental justice causes.
- Authentic messages generated less pushback, more positive company attitudes, and higher purchase intentions.
- People who were already highly involved in environmental justice viewed all messages as more authentic.

CSA from the Perspective of PR Pros

Key Findings

Practitioners identified key reasons for

<i>Action</i>	vs	<i>Inaction</i>
focusing on core stakeholders		risk mitigation
aligning with corporate identity & culture		irrelevance to business
responding to CEO values		apolitical company stance
peer pressure		respect for global cultural differences & religion
seeking purpose & value		lack of resources
relevance to business		avoiding public attention

- Interviewees saw little internal agreement on whether CSA is essential or a risk. Almost all feared getting in trouble because a statement on a controversial issue can never make everyone happy.
- However, some argued it is necessary to advocate for issues important to the business or its mission. Failing to do so could lose the support of key stakeholders.

"...if it relates to your business or your business is affected or has a direct line of influence or impact into a topic, you're going to lose a lot more by being silent than if you would take a stand or put a line in the sand..."

- There was a heightened focus on how CSA decisions impact the workplace. Many organizations are choosing not to take public stances, but are communicating internally about topics important to employees.

"We communicate to our own employees about this a lot like internal emails, like when things happen in the world. We take kind of internal positions to our employees, but I'd say, really not a ton of external advocacy."

How do organizations make advocacy decisions? How do practitioners balance the perspectives of various constituents?



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Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 public relations, corporate communication, and CSR managers of large U.S. corporations.

Takeaways

Be mindful of internal publics. By communicating views on issues that matter to employees and their communities, organizations can strengthen relationships with employees.

Define guidelines for advocacy. The lack of precise guidelines for CSA at the organizational level hinders professionals' ability to make consistent decisions. Creating a framework of when and how they speak about specific issues can help.

Weigh potential backlash against stakeholder priorities. The fear of getting in trouble creates tension in organizations. Communications professionals can reduce reputational risks by ensuring clarity, transparency, and authenticity in CSA.

Special Insight: Authentic Advocacy

Quantitative and qualitative studies were conducted to better define, measure, and assess the impacts of authenticity in CSA.

Takeaways

It's Complicated: Stakeholders have a complex understanding of authenticity that covers views on truthfulness, impact, persistence, and congruence.

Be Comprehensive: Strategize around and measure all four dimensions of authenticity to understand stakeholder views, build trust, and avoid backlash.

Authenticity above all: In organization-stakeholder relationships, enhancing authenticity may be more important than simply avoiding hypocrisy or offering transparency in CSA.

Background

Authenticity is key in determining whether stakeholders support or oppose advocacy efforts, but there are gaps in current research:

- There has been little work focused on how stakeholders understand this important concept.
- Authenticity is often assessed with very simple measures that may not accurately or consistently capture the entire concept.
- Trust is an important foundation for lasting relationships with stakeholders. CSA has the potential to bolster or damage trust. The relationship between authentic advocacy and trust has not been fully explored.



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Study 1: What do stakeholders view as authentic advocacy?

Key Findings

When an organization publicly takes a stance on a sociopolitical issue, stakeholders assess authenticity based on four dimensions.



Method

A review of research, an open-ended survey, and interviews were used to better understand how stakeholders define authenticity in advocacy for social and political issues.

Study 2: How can authenticity be more fully measured?

Key Findings

Analyses demonstrated sound reliability and validity of a 23 question scale to measure four dimensions of authenticity in CSA.

Method

Three surveys tested and refined a more comprehensive authenticity measure. Participants responded to one of five recent examples of CSA that they were familiar with:

- support for traditional marriage
- banning the sale of assault weapons
- campaign for racial equality
- speaking out on climate change
- opposing anti-abortion laws

Measuring Four Dimensions of Authenticity in Corporate Social Advocacy

Truthfulness

- 1) Speaking out establishes core values
- 2) Stand-taking demonstrates what values the company truthfully holds
- 3) The company knows itself
- 4) Pursuing truthful beliefs for society, instead of following current trends
- 5) Stand-taking reflects company purpose
- 6) Stand-taking is based on purpose, not just expectations from others

Persistence

- 1) Willingness to endure negative consequences of publicly speaking up
- 2) Taking a side despite potential to lose customers
- 3) Advocating although some people are against the stance
- 4) Publicly taking a stance despite risk to reputation
- 5) Keeping up advocacy despite risks to business
- 6) Advocating even though it may lose the trust of some stakeholders

Impact

- 1) Aiming to solve a social problem
- 2) Doing the right thing for society
- 3) Trying to positively impact public debates
- 4) Really helping people
- 5) Aiming to contribute to social change
- 6) Trying to act as a good citizen

Congruence

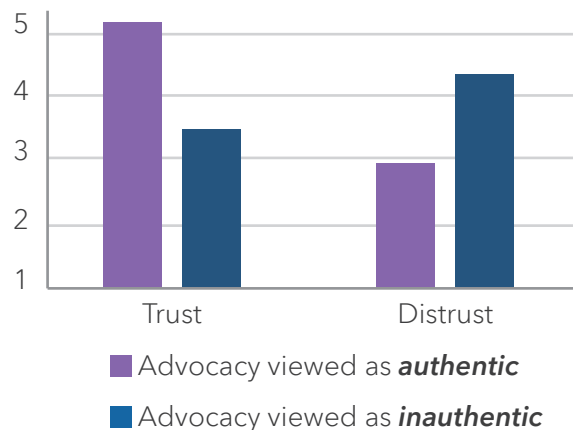
- 1) Advocacy walks the talk
- 2) Action plans align with statements
- 3) Advocacy is not just an empty promise
- 4) Constantly taking action to keep promises
- 5) What is done for an issue is not just words

Study 3: How does authentic advocacy impact relationships with stakeholders?

Key Findings

Authenticity in advocacy can enhance trust while reducing distrust.

Effects of Authenticity



Method

With the new measure of authenticity, this study examined relationships between authenticity, hypocrisy, and transparency in advocacy and both trust and distrust in a company.

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