

WHEN SHOULD WE SPEAK UP ABOUT SOCIAL ISSUES?

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As members of LaTESOL, we consider our roles in leading the profession forward. An important part of our organization's mission is advocacy. As caring leaders of efforts to support ELLs, we collectively and individually advocate for others. With the abundance of issues facing our profession, the question emerges: when should we speak up?

Companies and individuals are under increasing pressure to speak out on social issues. However, as well as the possibility for increasing support, there is an opportunity for backlash. Under the banner of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), some companies have used deliberate marketing tactics to capitalize on issues. Leading contemporary sources are now publicly pondering if Corporate Social Responsibility really works, or is in fact, counterproductiveⁱ. Accusations of “monetizing social issues” and “woke-washing” are becoming more prevalent, with negative consequences.

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With our mission firmly rooted in advocacy, LaTESOL intends to continue its leadership role and to speak out on issues impacting our profession. Nevertheless, the question emerges, “when should LaTESOL or any organization speak out about an issue?” This is a question that we can all ask ourselves personally as well. When should we publicly speak up? With limited time and breath, how can we effectively manage our personal and organizational pulpits?

In a recent articleⁱⁱ, the eminent communications professor Paul Argenti provides a framework for evaluating our desires to take a leadership role on an issue. He suggests three considerations for an

organization that are applicable to individuals as well: mission and core values, ability to meaningfully influence the outcome, and agreement of constituencies.

The Three Determining Questions



LaTESOL, for example, has a clearly articulated strategic plan that includes a mission and core values, among other elements. These statements can be found on our web site: [mission \(wildapricot.org\)](http://mission.wildapricot.org) and is partially reprinted at the end of this article.

The three determining questions posed by Argenti are:

1. **Does the issue align with your (company's/organization's/personal) strategy?** Strategy is based on the mission and core values of the organization. If there is misalignment with the issue, your statements will be viewed as inauthentic.
2. **Can you meaningfully influence the issue?** Do you have the expertise and resources to make a difference? Are you willing to put your money/time/actions where your mouth is? If not, you will risk being seen as hypocritical or “woke washing.”
3. **Will your constituencies support your speaking out?** If everyone agrees, then you reduce the risk of blowback. Unfortunately, it is a rare situation when all stakeholders agree on critical issues. When constituencies disagree, you must carefully discuss it and weigh the relative importance

of each constituency to reaching your overall goals.

The answers to these questions are rarely black and white; they are nuanced by the organization/person and the situation. They are not easy to answer! In those circumstances when the answer to all three questions is a resounding yes, then you have the opportunity to speak out effectively as a leader on the issue.

Recent Examples

Starbucks had a clear opportunity to lead after a notorious 2018 incident in a Philadelphia store. A store manager called 911 because two Black men were refused access to the bathroom and refused to leave the store, resulting in their arrest. Starbucks checked “yes” to all three questions. In its mission statement, Starbucks describes itself as a “third-place environment where everyone is welcome, and we can gather as a community and share great coffee and deepen human connection.” Its resources included the ability to shut down stores and educating 175,000 baristas. Starbucks issued a new bathroom policy and closed down 8,000 stores for an afternoon of training. Starbucks constituents were aligned. Customers and community members had been outraged. And, as one employee put it, the training gave them the opportunity to do something to change the system. Starbucks had to speak out and take a leadership role

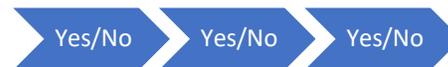
Unfortunately, the answers are not always as clear as in this case for Starbucks. Lack of clear answers was the case for companies like Shell or BMW. They have been accused of *greenwashing* and their ads have been banned due to misleading environmental claims. In 2008, Shell defined the world’s largest oil refinery as “sustainable”. In 2017 it was the turn of BMW, which falsely claimed in an ad that their new car was “zero emissions”.

Pinkwashing is another accusation arising from CSR mishaps. A famous example was the ad run by Pepsi starring Kendall Jenner. The company tried to jump on the Black Lives Matter movement started to stop police brutality. However, things didn’t go as expected. The ad quickly became a viral meme and, due to intense backlash, Pepsi was forced to pull the

ad from the internet less than 24 hours later. Even worse, the company suffered a stark decline in credibility.ⁱⁱⁱ

As the cases of Starbucks, BMW and Pepsi show, an organization should conduct a serious examination of the potential success – or backlash – that could occur from a decision to speak out. The organization’s credibility is on the line. Once lost, credibility is exceedingly difficult to regain.

Argenti’s Three-Answers Framework



Most of us need to ponder a response to social issues within a structured framework for analysis. Argenti suggests a three-answers framework for deciding if your organization should speak out. An organization should carefully analyze the responses to the three questions and discuss them at a strategic level, including (especially) with key constituents. Based on the answers to the three determining questions, a path for action emerges. Argenti’s framework is as follows:

Three Yeses – Take a Leadership Role

Opportunities to address issues where all three questions are answered yes are rare. If all three questions are answered with a Yes, then the organization should not only respond, but should also consider taking a leadership role. The organization should issue an early and widely distributed response, followed closely by actions representing the use of organizational resources. The organization should seize this unique moment!

Three Nos – Do not Speak Out



Conversely, three No answers are a clear message to the organization not to speak out. The risks clearly outweigh the rewards. The issue is not in your wheelhouse; you cannot make an impact and you are likely to alienate important constituencies. As

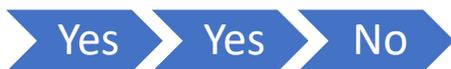
Mahatma Gandhi extolled, “Speak only if it improves upon the silence.”

Mixed Yeses and Nos – Situations for Potential Change

When the answers are mixed, the organization has different choices, including the choice to re-examine its mission and values. The situation may indicate that silence is best, or that it is time for the organization to change. In cases where two of the three questions are answered with a yes, there are viable options.

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- If the No is relative to alignment with mission and values but the organization can make an impact and has staunch support of its constituents, the organization should consider a change to its mission statement. This issue could be the catalyst to the realization that the organization has evolved beyond its original role.
- If the No is relative to ability to make a meaningful impact, consider a follower role or a role with an influential partner who can add the influence desired.



- ***If the No arises from an influential constituent, pause.*** This tricky situation deserves considerable analysis and potential change. It is possible that a change in constituencies is necessary, an activity not easily or lightly undertaken.
- If two of the three questions are answered with a yes, consider speaking out as a follower rather than as a leader.

In cases where there is only one Yes and two Nos, closely monitor the situation. Likely, over time, the one Yes environment will change to a two Yes or three No environment. Time is on your side here – use it.



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LaTESOL Will Continue to Speak Out

LaTESOL will speak out on the issues we believe important. We will inform our decisions to do so with the three-question framework. Our role as advocates for ELLs and their teachers is clearly established. We believe that LaTESOL should evolve and grow with the complexity of the issues of our time. We will do so based on our mission and core values, reprinted below from our Strategic Plan. Our constituencies include our teachers, our regulators and, most importantly, our ELLs. Our members are strong and proudful. LaTESOL will stand up and speak out when the Yeses prevail. And, when appropriate, count on us to lead.

LaTESOL Mission

LaTESOL is an association of Louisiana professionals advancing the quality of English language teaching through professional development, standards setting, and advocacy. Our goal is to become the trusted authority for knowledge and expertise in English language teaching and learning in Louisiana.

LaTESOL Core Values

- Professionalism in language education demonstrated by excellence in standards and practice that improve learning outcomes.
- Respect for diversity, multilingualism, multiculturalism, and individuals' language rights
- Integrity guided by ethical and transparent action
- Commitment to life-long learning
- Collaborative in regional/national/global community
- Professionalism in language education.

ⁱ Porter, Michael, Kramer, Mark (2006, December 1). [The Link Between Competitive Advantage and Corporate Social Responsibility](#). Harvard Business Review, Reprint R0612D-PDF-ENG

ⁱⁱ Argenti, Paul (2020, October 16). [When Should your Company Speak Up about a Social Issue?](#) Harvard Business Review, Reprint ho5xew.

ⁱⁱⁱ Guida, Alessandra (2021, September 10). [When Corporate Social Responsibility Goes Bad: Greenwashing](#). Barcelona Executive Business School.