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Brand Research and the New Face of Patriotism

Given the extraordinary degree of political enmity in the United States and the upcoming midterm elections, it seemed an apt time to revisit a survey analysis we cautioned brands (and tangentially, voters) about 2 years ago.

It was based on our Brand Keys predictive emotional engagement metrics and how consumers looked at brands when it came to the value of “patriotism.”

The study was conducted in *July 2016* in our 15th annual survey of iconic American brands revealing what drove “patriotism” when it came to brands. It was about how the drivers of loyalty and engagement had changed over the past half-decade, with a not-so-subtle move toward what might more correctly be defined as “nationalism.”

Here’s part of what we wrote at the time:

“Patriotism” is pride. Pride in one’s country and a willingness to defend it. Pride in what a brand stands for. It’s courage, it’s freedom of speech, it is liberty. It is ultimately a set of values people admire and brands can use to better position themselves.

“Nationalism,” on the other hand, has become the belief in the superiority of one country over another and its usual form is aggression, hostility, and belligerence. For brands it has become, more-often-than-not, *who* the brand represents. It’s the Bizarro world of patriotism. It’s mean and it’s small. It pits citizen against citizen, black against white, Christians against Muslims. Patriotism is rooted in unity and values. Nationalism is rooted in rivalry and odium, and usually results in violence.

- What was once “Pride” has moved closer to “Self-Importance.”
- What was unquestioned “Inclusion” has shifted to “Marginalization.”
- “Courage” has morphed to “Convenience”
- “Freedom” has actually become the vice of “Extremism.”

BOTTOM LINE WARNING TO BOTH BRANDS AND POLITICIANS: To no small degree, shifts in the drivers of patriotism have dramatically changed how consumers look at brands.

Playing the nationalism card works only with a very, very small percent of any population. Smart brands will know what consumers are willing to believe about them and will leverage the hell out of that. They end up winners. The less smart brands won’t know the difference. Oh, and there’s a

big difference between being patriotic and being political, another thing the American consumer is on to.

Patriotism isn't a campaign. It isn't changing the name of your brand to "America." It's not short, frenzied outbursts of emotion – with or without flags. Those are more promotional than patriotic and – more-the-pity for brands – consumers know it. They can feel it!

Real patriotism is the quiet and steady dedication of a lifetime's work – whether you're speaking of a brand or about a person. Some approaches can be categorized as "liberal," and others "conservative," but perhaps Mark Twain's definition is the way to go; "Patriotism is support for your country all the time – and the government when it deserves it," a sentiment that pertains to both brands and politicians.

And if you can configure an important value – whether for a brand campaign or a political campaign into something emotional and believable, consumers (and voters) will not only stand up and salute, they'll buy whatever it is you're selling!