

The background of the slide is a white surface covered with numerous colorful handprints and paint splatters in shades of blue, yellow, red, green, and purple. The handprints are of various sizes and orientations, some appearing as solid colors and others as outlines. The paint splatters are small, scattered dots and streaks. In the top left corner, the Gartner logo is visible. The main title is centered on the left side, flanked by two vertical orange bars.

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The CMO's 3-Step Approach to Articulating Their Brand's Position on Social Justice Issues

Social justice issues are gaining attention from the C-suite

Around half of consumers expect businesses to take a stand on social justice issues, according to Gartner consumer sentiment data. Employees do, as well. For those reasons and others, many executive leaders feel they have no choice but to take a vocal position — 60% of executive leaders even believe it can be good for business.

It often falls to the CMO to articulate their brand's position. That's no easy feat, given that social issues are complicated. Taking a public position on a divisive issue is bound to thrill some stakeholders at the same time that it alienates others.

Fortunately, there are three steps CMOs can take to identify the social issues for which the brand has a genuine and articulate affinity and establish a coherent position around them that avoids damaging reputation or customer loyalty. They are:



Evaluate the organization's actions on relevant issues.



Decide on your brand's social justice identity.



Research consumer opinions and expectations on the issues.

48% of consumers expect brands to take a stand on social justice issues

60% of executive leaders believe taking a position on a social justice issue is good for business

Step 1: Evaluate the organization's actions on relevant issues

CMOs must clearly define where the company stands on sensitive issues. This includes identifying gaps between stated values, words and actions.

Even when organizations are consistent, they may not be choosing actions that have a high impact. For example, marketing leaders often readily participate in events related to a brand-relevant issue, yet consumers don't think that carries much weight. Instead, they want to see organizations reflect their position on cause in corporate policies, processes and practices.

As part of their evaluation of where the brand stands, CMOs should partner with the rest of the C-suite to answer three main questions: What do we stand for? What do we plan to do? How do we plan to achieve our social justice goals? The answers will help define an organization's commitment, internal strategy and methods to ensure accountability on contentious social and political issues.

Keep in mind during this exercise that there is no risk-free position — choosing to stay silent on an issue is still a type of stand that comes with its own risks.



Table 1: Three Questions to Ensure Action on Social Justice Initiatives

Question	Considerations
What do we stand for, why does this matter to our organization and how much risk are we willing to take?	Consider where the organization stands on sensitive issues, appreciating that not taking a stand is still a decision that can increase or decrease risk. Clearly articulate the organization's level of commitment to social justice issues. Address how these issues are important and relevant to the organization. Link the issues to organization values and goals to set aspirations unique to the organization (see 3 Criteria to Prioritize ESG and Social Impact Commitments).
What do we plan to do to meet our aspirations?	Audit the organization's current practices and identify opportunities to improve social justice performance in organizational process. Most importantly, identify gaps between your brand's social justice values and its actions.
How do we plan to ensure we achieve what we've set out to do?	Little is done in an organization unless someone is made accountable. Review, modify and introduce accountability mechanisms throughout the organization to ensure the strategy's objectives are met and measured over time.

Step 2: Research customer opinions and expectations on the issues

Some customers will react positively and others negatively, regardless of the position. CMOs can help their organizations anticipate the range of reactions and limit negative impacts by understanding the range of opinions that exist. Best practices include:

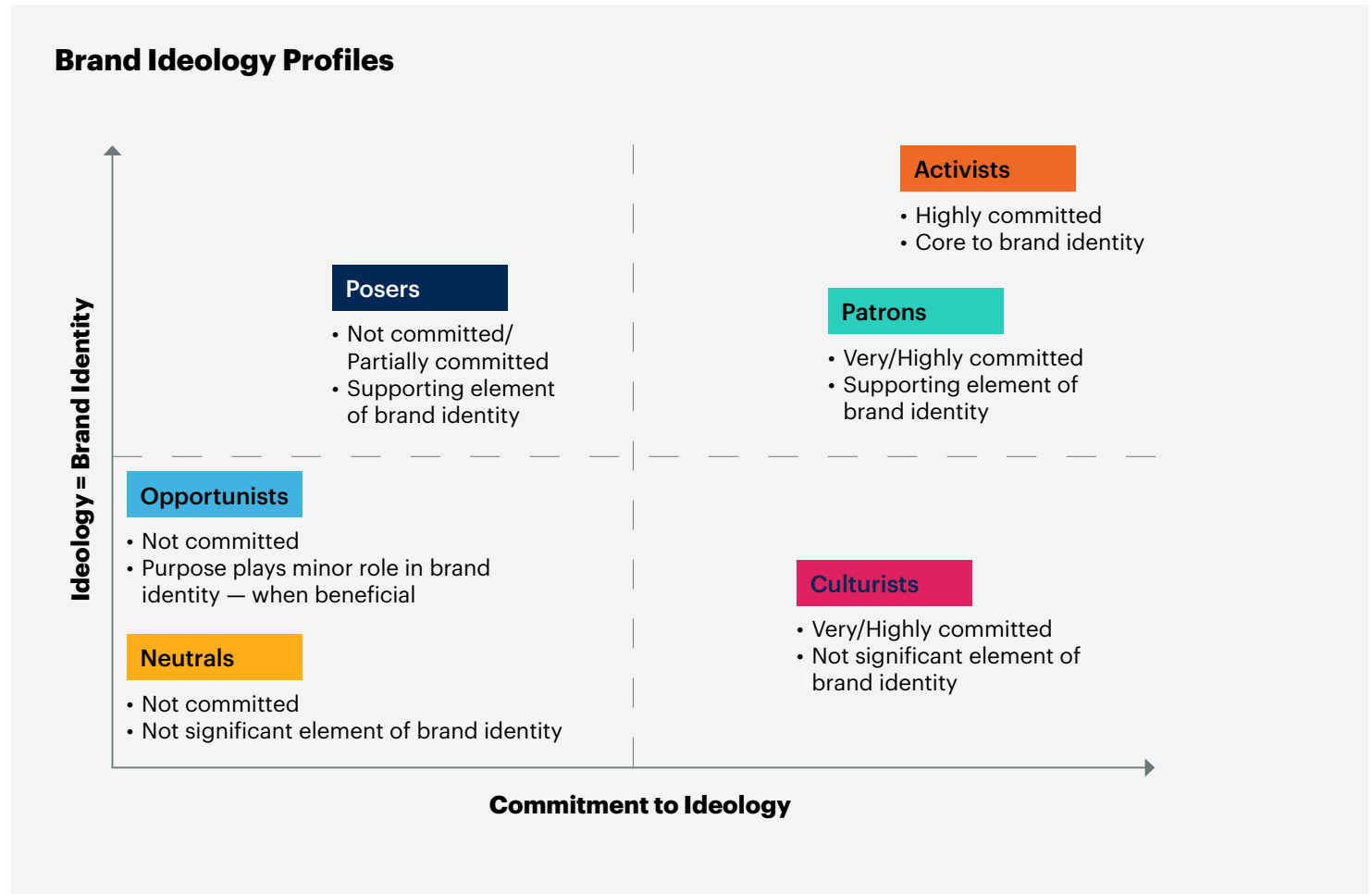
- **Know the audience:** Research what your customers think, expect and do; where they stand on divisive social and political issues; and what they expect of your brand.
- **Don't pander:** Brands perceived as adopting an issue to attract new customers can be perceived as “wokewashing.”
- **Anticipate reactions:** Prepare to mitigate and respond to a wide range of support and disapproval. Criticism may also come from unexpected quarters.
- **Listen, monitor and respond:** Don't overreact to loud voices, but do prepare to engage.
- **Practice transparency:** Don't hide from your organization's actions or history. Acknowledge shortcomings and reveal your plans and actions to improve.
- **Iterate rather than reverse course:** Be prepared to adjust course as necessary. Test your actions in small ways and iterate your way to success.



Step 3: Decide on your brand's social justice identity

There is a difference between brand ideology — meaning, where the organization stands and how it acts on social justice issues — and brand identity — in this case, how much the brand aligns itself with that social justice stance. Knowing your social justice identity can help determine how much to integrate social justice issues into your marketing and branding.

To understand your social justice identity, CMOs can audit the organization's internal values and brand position to identify its ideological profile. Organizations with high alignment between their ideology and their brand identity may choose to take a more vocal and aggressive stand on certain social issues. Those with poor alignment should tread lightly, as they are more likely to be seen as opportunistic and inauthentic for taking a social justice stance.



Leverage the 3 steps together to treat social justice as a strategic issue, not just a marketing issue

If your organization hasn't walked the walk by taking a clear stand that is integrated consistently in its values, words and actions, then don't talk — yet. Doing so risks making yourself a target for activists, critics and detractors, or calling attention to your organization's lack of action. Take the time instead to clarify your current internal position, research what customers think and expect from you, and establish the social justice identity from which you will communicate your organization's beliefs.

Gartner experts are here to help you drive stronger performance on your mission-critical priorities — including on the social justice issues that matter to your organization. Become a client today.



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