

How to Inoculate Your Brand from Political Backlash: Interview with Elsie Maio



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Elsie Maio is on a mission – to empower high performing businesses to profitably align with the wellbeing of humanity. Since 1994, she has been touted as a practical visionary in the field of high performance brand strategy – helping clients get ahead of emerging global trends in business and society, long before it became fashionable.

I interviewed Elsie for her take on how brands can protect themselves during a time when politics can be risky business.

Q: The President has disparaged a variety of brands online, leading to instant drops in stock prices (for [Boeing](#) and [Nordstrom](#), for example), as well as immediate [negative brand sentiment on Twitter as his millions of followers join in the conversation](#).

Have brands ever faced such a risky political environment in the past, or is this something new to contend with?

Stock prices have always reacted to negative news that comes from a civic or political context, but I don't know that we've ever had a public figure pointing a finger at companies and shaming them with the suddenness, randomness and reach that's happened recently.

Sure, in the past, we've seen public opinion turn against businesses – which in turn was followed by legislative action. The tobacco industry, for example.

And when an egregious fault has been associated with an industry or company, meaning it has been hurtful to human beings, we've seen stock prices drop and sometimes companies brought to their knees.

What's different here is two things: the apparent randomness, and the sting of a celebrity politician singling out a company that challenges his agenda, as Trump has done. It's like a personal attack on the character of the company when its patriotism is, in a way, challenged by The White House.

Q: What, if anything, can brands do to prevent this type of unwanted political attention?

Companies cannot prevent attention. But there are two ways corporate leaders can deal with this risky political environment:

1. As a reluctant citizen.

These are extremely fraught times for companies, and those who find themselves in the crosshairs appropriately call in their crisis management folks to do whatever they can to minimize damage and quietly patch things up.

The 'reluctant citizen' is in the old paradigm: the business of business is business. The old paradigm response rests heavily on communications to either set the record straight or to distract and recast your image as sympathetic to a particularly emotive public issue. Maybe you will even invest in inspiring advertisements like the ones we

saw at the Super Bowl and the Oscars. Or, you will double-down on your lobbying in Washington.

2. As a generous, generative citizen.

To stop there, with traditional crisis management programs, in reacting to Trump tweets or whomever else, is foolish. It's like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic.

The underlying vulnerability is more fundamental than any one issue they may accuse you of: the damning insinuation is that you are not carrying your weight as a modern, responsible citizen. You really do need to build another boat, and smart companies are doing this.

Don't get me wrong; if you get caught flat footed in a tweet storm, engage the best crisis communication team you can find. But, in another watery analogy, don't confuse caulking the foundation in a floodplain with relocating to higher ground.

Define your brand of citizenship, or have it redefined at political whim for you. It's the trend; you might as well look at this period of White House volatility as an opportunity to hop on it now and have it fuel the company's growth and employee happiness.

Companies will be held to this standard by Millennials soon enough. Not only are you girding yourself for defense on the field today, but you're also creating brand advantage by defining the play.

Q: What does it mean to be a generative citizen?

Being a generous, generative citizen means embracing purpose and looking beyond financial gain and shareholder value.

We have been expecting since the late 90s that companies will be held more accountable for their participation as global citizens. They'll need to reorganize around the fact that the shareholder is not the only constituent to address anymore. Generating more and better financial returns alone is just not going to do it.

This is becoming increasingly popular through entities like B Corporations—companies committed to benefit society as well as their shareholders. Legally, they will not be sued by shareholders for including things like social impact and environmental impact in their decisions that might reduce profitability. This is one opportunity to not only

inoculate the company from risky political situations but also to put a stake in the ground as a modern corporate leader.

Philip Kotler and **Christian Sarkar** talk about brand activism in a recent [article](#) in *The Marketing Journal*. Look at how Patagonia and Unilever are changing the game. These companies are generative citizens. They're solving real problems in the real world. And our own work spells out how such leaders, like Unilever, are doing it.

Q: Speaking of moving, emotional advertisements, there were several big brands that aired “culturally significant” ads during the Super Bowl, such as AirBNB, Coca Cola and Budweiser. [AirBNB CMO Jonathan Mildenhall argues](#) that ads like this aren't political statements; they're social stands that “doing what's right by humanity.” Is it possible to make such a distinction in the current political climate?

Several [Super Bowl ads](#) did make a statement and were emotionally inspiring. But here's the thing: the values implied in the ad must reflect the true soul of the company. There's no way around this except to be authentic and tell the truth. If you have a strong inclination as a company to stand up for your values, do so, but don't pretend to do so fully unless you are demonstrably on that path.

That does not mean don't talk about your truth and what inspires your people even if you are not living it 100% yet. For instance, they could say, 'At Airbnb, we recognize the value of inclusiveness, we're all in this together, and we're beginning to integrate these values into everything we do. Beginning to integrate.'

Then you need to demonstrate with proof points how you're doing that. Articulate your purpose as a profitmaking corporation or organization that's cognizant of social purpose or social impact and match your proof points.

Don't say it in your ad unless you have the proof points to demonstrate it. And then, demonstrate it consistently. Where company behaviors conflict with the inspiring messages they put out is where the trust rupture begins.

Q: How does a brand go about making the transition to a generative corporate citizen?

You could consider the first phase of this transition to be, Know Thyself. Audit all your employees and stakeholders to discover their values and what citizenship means to them.

The next phase in this transition is to actually operate in that way you might later describe in your ads. What is your real purpose and how are you embracing it? How are you capitalizing on that in your company?

We're so good at creating experiences and communicating our brand promise that it's disconnected from our corporate operations. Having Marketing operate in a silo is one of the biggest problems we have. We have dug a big hole between the expectation we created and what we're actually doing.

Instead, you must knit the CMO's activities with the COO's activities and make sure that they're walking hand in hand. If you don't, you're vulnerable to every kind of attack—and you should be.

Q: How will acting in this generative way help companies to protect themselves from political turmoil?

The spotlight of political criticism is swinging in an arc, somewhat wildly these days. There's no protecting from the vagaries of random public attention. The best way to 'inoculate' your business against negative effects of the 4-am-presidential-tweet is to strengthen your immune system from the inside out.

Let's be clear: CEOs cannot inoculate their companies from attention, nor from criticism. But they can be prepared to turn that spotlight to their advantage.

There is really only one way to inoculate from the negative effects of criticism about not being a contributing citizen. That is to be a contributing citizen in the way that matters.

To try to protect ourselves from random tweets by deflecting with clever marketing communications is just digging a deeper hole. You should react, but don't put your energy there. Put your energy where there is growth and energy and optimism.

That means that all employees and stakeholders have a clear sense of organizational purpose and are delighted with the tangible, measurable wellbeing it generates for and

with all stakeholders. This is the model of the enlightened companies we are watching—and have been supporting for two decades already.

Q: What might that look like?

There are really three key pieces.

Character: This is confidence in knowing who you are, your strengths, your vulnerabilities, and the humility to do what it takes to meet the higher purpose of your organization. That could look like knowing when to partner, when to ask for assistance, when to engage with ‘the crowd’ as a resource, crowdsourcing innovation, for example. And nourishing that confidence with conscious governance systems.

Contribution: Just as the most effective leaders are those who are ‘in service’ to their constituents (servant-leaders is what Peter Senge has called them), so too the leading organizations experience themselves as ‘in service’ to the greater good, to their communities, and to the customers whom they support in thriving collectively. They contribute to individuals because they see how the health of the communities they serve is part of their business model.

Humanity: Such organizations are moved by values that go beyond the P&L statement. They are enduring values that bullet-proof companies from the trust-deficit that is so prevalent today.

In my work, we use our process called **SoulBranding**SM to help forward-looking companies align their behaviors with explicitly human, motivating values that nourish their collaborative, generative relationship with all stakeholders.

***Elsie Maio** has guided leaders in the Fortune 100 for over 25 years to achieve specific business goals by managing their corporate brands holistically. She is an alumna of McKinsey & Company, Institutional Investor, and several premier corporate identity firms. She is a Board Member of Ethical Markets Media. Since 1997 Elsie helps CEOs prepare for what she then identified as “the coming tsunami of corporate accountability.” This holistic work has guided clients to list successfully on the New York Stock Exchange, reposition multibillion dollar product brands, and generate demand in customer communities by leading with employees’ unique set of social values. Her firm Humanity, Inc integrates three consulting disciplines: business strategy, brand experience and human-values alignment. Its mantra is Business Brilliance for Social Good. www.soulbranding.com*