



Black Lives Matter: Credibility and authenticity

Global insight from enterprise employees
on their company's communication about
Black Lives Matter



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Introduction

#BlackLivesMatter was founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer in the US. Its mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities.

Following the public outcry after the 2020 killing of George Floyd, companies of all sizes started raising their voice in support of the movement. Social media 'blackouts' and company statements, coupled with pledges and donations to civil right groups, appeared from a wide range of industries across the globe.

We wanted to investigate and see how employees felt about how their company responded. Did their company make a statement of support to the cause? Did they feel it was authentic? Has anything changed? Is any training/education taking place?

With some brands being accused of hypocrisy, we wanted to explore employees' perceptions—the ones who really understand their company's culture—and whether they feel their company is walking the walk.

A message of support is one thing but are enterprises really doing enough to inspire change or do employees think it is a PR stunt?

Foreword

At no other time in recent history have so many high profile brands publicly spoken out about topics of social injustice in the world. Although a plethora of media articles have already highlighted the disparity between the enthusiasm to adopt the #BLM in communication and the diversity displayed in boardrooms, there's no denying it's forced brands to stand up and be counted.

Industries of all types have publicly spoken out from Nike to Yorkshire Tea.

It genuinely feels like momentous change is taking place in corporate communications, both internally and externally. Most enterprises proudly talk about their company culture and it's rare to read an interview with a CEO who doesn't talk about their brand values.

But with reputations on the line, credibility needs to be at the forefront. Brands who talk the talk must also walk the walk or risk seriously damaging their reputation both with staff and the general public they serve.

As Professor Mark Ritson recently observed *"if you care about black lives, you don't get inspired by an Instagram post. You get inspired by black faces in the boardroom. Companies need to become the change they are tweeting about."*

What a business says or doesn't say is examined by its biggest brand ambassadors – its employees. If they don't feel it's credible, word will quickly spread. During these challenging times the brands who've inspired their staff, lived and breathed their company culture, and shown the world that they will back up their words have the greatest chance of success.

Communications always need to be carefully thought about and should always be credible. It is important to not shy away from supporting movements or to ignore them, but if you talk the talk, it's imperative you walk the walk.

Paul Stallard

Managing director, Arlington Research



Methodology

Our survey was conducted online between 27 July and 5 August 2020, surveying 2,000 employees who work for brands that have a minimum of 1,000 members of staff. Respondents came from the USA (667 respondents), the UK (667 respondents), and Australia (666 respondents).

Our survey explored seven key areas

1. Did the company the employee works for make a statement of support towards BLM in the media and social media?
2. When the company spoke, did the employee feel it was authentic?
3. Was the employee embarrassed by the way their company spoke about the movement?
4. If the company made a statement, did they explain what it would do to improve inequality in society and amongst its own staff?
5. Was the message in the public domain different to what people on the ground were seeing?
6. How many companies had increased training/education for staff?
7. Has the BLM movement encouraged any positive policy changes within the business?

Global headlines

- A little over a half (47%) of employees said their employer had made statements of support for BLM in the media and social media.
- Nearly a third (32%) of employees didn't believe it was authentic when their company spoke about the cause.
- Three in ten employees (28%) were embarrassed by the way their employer spoke about the BLM movement.
- Just over half (51%) of employees expressed that their company had publicly stated what it was doing to improve inequality in society/ amongst its own staff.
- Over a third (34%) of employees reported that the company's external messaging was different from its internal messaging.
- Nearly half (48%) said that training/education had increased for staff to help create a fairer society/workplace.
- 45% of employees believe that the company they work for has changed its policies towards diversity in a positive way.



Our findings

I believe the BLM movement has made my company change its policies towards diversity in a positive way

Under half of employees surveyed agreed with this statement (45%), though only 16% completely disagreed. Unsurprisingly, following the recent news stories in the US, just a third of US employees agreed (33%) compared to over half of Australian employees (52%).

Organisations with 5,000-10,000 employees fared better than those in excess of a 10,000 strong workforce (six in ten versus three in ten employees, respectively).

Across the age groups, Millennials were the most positive about their company changing its policies (51%), but this sentiment wasn't shared by Generation Z (38%) or the Baby Boomers especially (29%). Have older generations heard it all before and seen little change?

The company I work for has made statements of support towards BLM in the media and social media

Almost half of employees said their employers had made statements of support for the BLM movement (47%). Employers in the UK (52%) were most likely to have made statements, followed by Australia (49%), but only two fifths of employers in the USA (41%) had done so.

Six in ten employers with 5,000-10,000 employees were reported to have made statements (59%), followed by just over half of those with 1,000-4,999 employees (52%), while only a third of employers with over 10,000 employees (34%) had. Is this because it's easier for smaller enterprises to implement change quickly?

Half of Generation X employees said their employers had made statements (51%), with Baby Boomers least likely to say their employers had done this (36%).

The company I work for has publicly stated what it's doing to improve inequalities in society and amongst its own staff

Half of employees (51%) said their company had publicly stated what was being done to improve society and staff inequalities. Again, Australian employers were most likely to have done so (59%), compared to just 41% in the US.

Six in ten companies with 5,000-10,000 employees (60%) had publicly stated this, compared to only four in ten companies with over 10,000 employees (40%).

Millennials were most likely to say their company had made a public statement (54%), with older employees less likely to agree (Generation Z 45%, Baby Boomers 44%).

There clearly is some work to do here.



The company I work for has increased training/education for staff on creating a fairer society

Just under half (48%) of employees said there had been an increase in staff training/education in response to BLM. This rose to six in ten (59%) in Australia but was lowest in the US (37%) where, if news reports are to be believed, the situation is worse.

Six in ten companies with 5,000-10,000 employees (59%) had increased staff training, but this fell to a third for companies with over 10,000 employees (34%).

Over half of Millennial employees reported increased staff training/education (53%), along with half of Generation X (50%) compared to one third of Baby Boomers (35%).

Admittedly, implementing training across a wider workforce will take longer to filter through and diversity training may not be a priority for businesses in the middle of a pandemic, so we hope to see these stats rise over time.

I believe that the management team of my company is doing all it can to improve diversity within the business and it isn't just a 'PR stunt'

Over half of employees believe the management team in their company is doing all it can to improve diversity within the business (54%). This rose to 61% in Australia but was lowest in the US at 46%.

Almost two thirds of employees in companies with 5,000-10,000 employees (63%) believed this wasn't a PR stunt, compared to four in ten employees of companies with over 10,000 employees (42%). It seems, if bigger organisations have attempted to support the movement, the feeling on the ground is that employees aren't seeing change and so are maybe less believing of any communications.

Generation X employees were most likely to believe this (57%), with Generation Z least likely (46%). This would seem to imply that younger generations believe their management team can do much more...

When my company spoke about BLM I didn't believe it was authentic

Sadly, nearly a third of employees (32%) didn't believe their company was being authentic when it spoke about BLM. Almost half of UK employees felt this (45%), compared to a quarter of employees in both the US and Australia (26% each). The Brits especially seem disbelieving considering employers in the UK were most likely to have made statements.

Four in ten employees in companies with 5,000-10,000 employees (43%) didn't believe their company statements were authentic, compared to two in ten working in companies with over 10,000 employees (21%). Once more, the bigger companies are considered the worst for talking the talk.

Millennials were most likely to believe what was said wasn't authentic (37%), while Baby Boomers were least likely to agree with this statement (20%).

I felt embarrassed by the way the company I work for spoke about the BLM movement

Three in ten employees were embarrassed by the way their employer spoke about the BLM movement (28%). This was highest amongst UK employees (38%), while employees in both the US (23%) and Australia (21%) were less embarrassed. What are the Brits getting wrong? We're one of the more supportive countries of the movement, yet the feedback is negative.

Four in ten employees working for companies with 5,000-10,000 employees were embarrassed (43%), whilst only 15% of those working in companies with over 10,000 employees feeling the same. Smaller enterprises are trying to implement change, but this is not being well received? While bigger organisations who have more work to do, are doing nothing/less, as expected?

Millennials were most likely to say they were embarrassed (33%) compared to the older age groups, especially Baby Boomers (16%).

These stats are worrying. Employees feel their companies are getting it wrong. You have to ask are communication teams just doing what they are told from above or is there a lack of empathy?

The message my company is putting into the public domain about BLM is different to what is said to its employees

One third (34%) of employees reported that their employer's external and internal messaging was different. This increased to over four in ten in the UK (43%), compared to a quarter in the US (25%).

Different messages were most likely in companies with 5,000-10,000 employees (47%), and companies with 1,000-4,999 employees (40%), with only one fifth of employees in companies with over 10,000 employees agreeing with this (19%).

Four in ten Millennials (41%) reported different messages by their employers with Baby Boomers least likely to say this was true for their employer (20%).

Token gestures and announcements by companies won't be tolerated and employees recognise these differences, and very quickly, so do the public.

Conclusions

Consumers know when they're being paid lip service, and after the way 2020 has continued to challenge everyone globally, people have little patience for it. People want to feel inspired. They want to see real change. But most of all, they don't want to be lied to.

After the tragic events which saw a swell of feelings and increased discussion around the BLM movement, a number of brands who'd historically never spoken out publicly did so. This is welcome. As long as it's authentic.

Blacking out your social media for a day or releasing a statement about standing with communities who suffer prejudice is no bad thing. As long as it's backed up with action.

The employees we surveyed expressed feelings of embarrassment at how their company spoken about the topic, and a third reported external and internal messages were at odds with each other, which is really concerning.

Much is made of company culture and what a brand stands for. Now is the time for brands to stand by their messages. Employees are brand ambassadors and if they don't feel that the business is being authentic, word soon gets around.

Brands need to listen to their employees and use this research to create communication plans that reflect the culture of the organisation, resonate and have meaning.

Now is not the time for enterprises to underestimate their employees. To be able to ride out the storm of Covid-19 and any possible recession, you'll need the full support and backing of your employees. Enterprises need to become the change they're publicly talking about.

Credibility and authenticity are the most essential elements of any communication campaign and it's critical you walk the walk today and tomorrow, not just talk about it.

Paul Stallard

Managing director, Arlington Research



About Arlington Research

Arlington Research is a full-service independent market research agency. We provide clients from around the world with robust data via quantitative research, in depth exploration via qualitative research, and audits on what's out there already via desk research. All our team are director level and focused on providing intelligent analysis and creative insight that help our clients bring their story to life.

Our director-level team will design your research from sample design to final reporting. Each piece of research is reliable, robust, delivered with a quick turnaround, and analyzed to ensure the research creates maximum impact. Our scope of work is broad, and we run research for leading brands and organizations from many different sectors. We are experienced in researching hard-to-reach audiences and markets and we would love to help bring your story to life.

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