

Consumers reassess shopping habits as brands deliver muted DEI campaigns

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“I would be hesitant to support an organization that is using that iconography sans any kind of awareness or education as to why it exists in the first place,” he said [in a TikTok video](#).

Consumers now expect sustained and meaningful social action from brands, instead of isolated gestures. As brands pull back or quiet their DEI initiatives, consumers are paying close attention.

- 53% of Americans feel disappointed when brands stay out of social conversations, according to a May Givisly report.
- 40% of [Gen Zers](#) and 19% of all consumers have stopped using or purchasing brands that contradicted or reversed DEI efforts, according to a March survey by Ad Age and The Harris Poll.

More than a quarter (27%) of US consumers consider brand values more today than they did five years ago, per Givisly. Brands launching surface-level DEI initiatives—or omitting them entirely—will face backlash.

“Very few brands can afford to alienate their target customers,” said Sky Canaves, principal analyst at EMARKETER. “Younger consumers, in particular, are very aware of the choices they have, and of the power they have to act with their dollars.”

Balancing values and value

Some 64% of US consumers and 79% of Gen Zers are willing to pay more for brands that reflect their values, per Givisly. But economic realities often force tough choices, especially when the more affordable option is the brand they don’t align with.

Consumers will first switch to cheaper brands or product alternatives in response to tariff price increases, per a March 2025 Collage Group survey.

Even when they can’t always shop with their values, consumers welcome small actions within their control, said EMARKETER analyst Paola Flores-Marquez.

“People function very well when they’re given one explicit activity,” she said, citing the recent Target boycotts as an example. “They know what their shopping alternatives are. Social movements fall apart when there isn’t a specific plan.”

Sustaining social action

Instead of one-off marketing plays or product collections, consumers want brands to integrate sustainable action into their business.

- Over 6 in 10 US consumers want brands to discuss their values in ads, opposed to just their products, per Givvly.
- 55% of consumers say they lose trust in a brand that reverses course on social and political issues, per a Gartner survey.

“Going back on a stance is worse than not taking a stance,” said Flores-Marquez. “All you’ve done is alienate your supporters without courting the other side that is never going to support you.”

Even for brands that maintain their DEI efforts, a change in tone doesn’t go unnoticed. While brands aim to avoid controversy through safe messaging, campaigns that don’t take a strong position could be viewed by consumers as bland or inauthentic, said Canaves.

"If a brand was previously very specific in its DEI efforts and then shifts to ambiguous terms like 'togetherness,' younger consumers in particular will call them out," said Canaves.

Moving past missteps

To avoid oversimplifying social issues, brands should involve creators from the community they want to represent in the creative process at the start, instead of seeking their endorsements at the campaign launch, said Flores-Marquez.

“Displaying insider knowledge without presenting the insider makes you question whether a brand is co-opting something, or they actually mean it,” she said.

While values-conscious audiences are sensitive to DEI pullbacks and insincere campaigns, more than a third of consumers recognize that companies can evolve beyond past missteps, per Givvly.

“If you’re honest about your mistake and you own up to it and apologize, most people are pretty forgiving,” said Flores-Marquez. “But no one ever does that.”

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