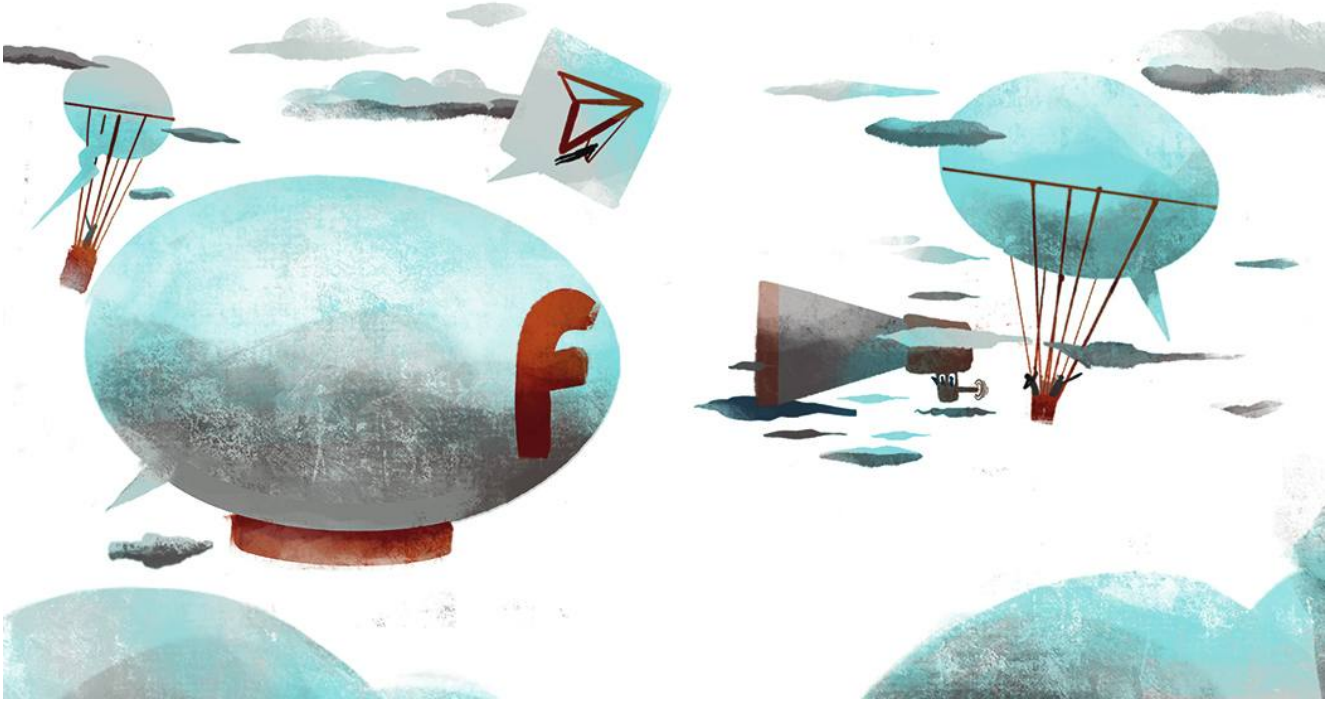
Culture wars: Take a stand or sit them out?

Before you stake a position and your reputation on a controversial issue, make sure you know where your company stands. Follow this advice for choosing your words and your battles carefully.



January 13, 2022

By Yago de la Cierva

In 2019, Chick-fil-A scrapped plans to open restaurants in the U.K. after LGBTQ+ activists launched protests and boycotts against the American fast-food chain. The outcry was sparked by the company's decision some years earlier to donate money to organizations opposing same-sex marriage. Although the company's supporters launched an effective counter boycott, or buycott, Chick-fil-A decided it was time to steer clear of the controversy. CEO Dan

©IESE Business School

Cathy sought to redirect the company's charitable giving toward the hopefully less divisive topics of youth education, homelessness and hunger. But that decision alienated the employees, customers and public figures who had been staunch defenders of Chick-fil-A throughout the previous media storm. In attempting to leave one battlefield, the company stepped into another.

Should companies take a stand on hot-button issues? To what extent should personal values affect the management of a business? Is there ever a right time for a company to wade into culture wars or is it always best to avoid them? As the Chick-fil-A case shows, even trying to take no position is to take a position. And in today's polarized environment, there will be consequences either way.

Caught in the crossfire

Along with traditional sources of crises (think toxic products, cyberattacks or corruption), companies must increasingly navigate crises arising from values and beliefs on which there are different societal views — in other words, culture wars. Companies often find themselves caught in the crossfire either because they have decided to position themselves on an issue or because the CEO has expressed personal views about it. When there is no clear consensus on a contentious issue and companies do decide to speak up, it may blow up in their face.

This is a pattern I have followed for years. My interest in crisis management and corporate communication led me to investigate the rapid rise of these new crises and how companies can prevent them, which I have detailed in various case studies for IESE.

As the list of hotly debated issues grows, so, too, do the chances of a company finding itself in hot water. Does a Spanish bank operating in Mexico have to respond to the Mexican president's request for an apology for abuses committed by Spanish *conquistadores* 500 years ago? Should Lego stop selling its toys at Shell gas stations under pressure from environmentalists to cut ties with the oil industry? Should universities change the names on their buildings or remove statues because they honor 19th-century slave owners?

Some people think firms can easily sidestep such issues by staying above the fray and, if asked, keeping their answers elegantly elusive: "We respect everyone's opinion." But the reality is not so simple. Stakeholders expect companies to be clear about what they stand for. Vague answers and "no comment" won't cut it. Let's examine why.

©IESE Business School

Thanks for reading IESE insight
To continue reading this premium content,
please click below

www.iese.edu/insight

©IESE Business School