

THE SHAKE UP YEAR

Corporate trends shaping digital strategies in 2021



Strategic Communications

Digital-inspired trends shaping 2021

In 2020 we saw the power of social media in facilitating societal change. We also witnessed how social media users disrupted and led the discourse on corporate purpose and values, causing many to reappraise the role that businesses should play in today's world. With no let-up in either the volatility or influence of social media predicted for 2021, we explore three of the key trends for the year ahead and how companies can harness the power of social media for good.

2020 has been a year like no other and the global pandemic, coupled with self-isolation and working from home, has propelled digital communications right to the very forefront of efforts to save lives and the global economy. With much talk of a nascent 'Zoom Boom' happening, digital platforms have boosted economies and enabled human connection and interaction in a period of physical isolation.

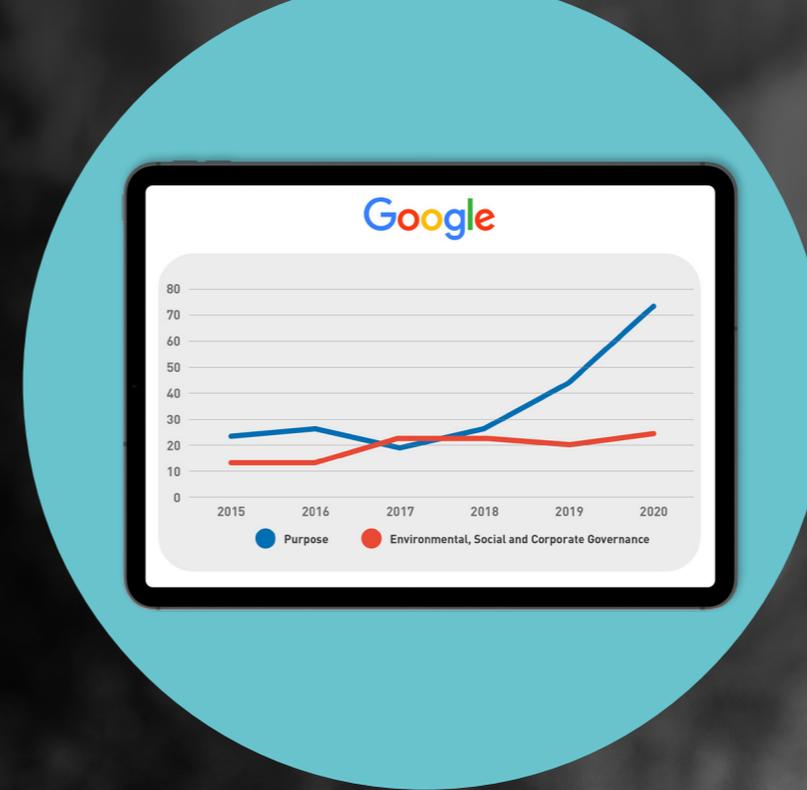
The pandemic has also created an impetus for social change, sparking increased demand for companies to act ethically and with greater societal purpose, manifested in the acceleration of social activism throughout 2020.

Businesses have felt the pressure to respond to this rapidly changing landscape by evolving and increasing the sophistication of social media strategies. Many have also witnessed how audiences which were once ambivalent to their business are now keenly interested, readily mobilised and far less forgiving of mistakes. This complex scenario means companies must be more prepared than ever for all eventualities and redouble efforts to deliver successful social media strategies that generate positive engagement and interaction.



Trend 1: Demand for societal purpose

It is widely accepted that successful organisations are driven not solely by profit, but increasingly by purpose and contribution to society. *Only seven percent* of Fortune 500 CEOs now believe companies should “mainly focus on making profits and not be distracted by social goals”. The burning question for organisations is no longer whether they should have a clearly defined social purpose, but how they can communicate their purpose with authenticity and credibility to key audiences.



← Google Trends graph demonstrating a growing interest in ESG vs. purpose, indicating that organisations are focused on the 'how' of purpose, rather than the 'why'.

There's a greater audience demand for corporate companies to communicate with purpose:



Re-defining goals:

Turmoil in many sectors has intensified the need to re-evaluate business purpose.

This has compelled organisations to explore and define purpose goals which requires understanding of how to communicate them through digital in an authentic and credible way to engage sceptical audiences.



The emergence of new audiences:

Technology has accelerated the emergence of a 'stakeholder economy' meaning a gradual reorientation towards more diverse and complex audiences.

In 2021, this requires consideration around how to identify, understand, reach and engage a much wider audience network.



Audience trust is fragile:

Reputation has become an even more valuable asset, with [research showing](#) that consumers are most likely to trust, champion and even protect a company with a strong and clearly defined purpose.

In a tumultuous environment where audiences are increasingly likely to act on the communication they receive, building reputational credit and audience trust is critical.



Changed boundaries and behaviours:

Audience groups are constantly evolving and becoming smarter at leveraging their collective influence to voice their demands and expectations of organisations.

Boundaries are obfuscating and now is the time to address these challenges and harness the opportunities they bring for the future.



Trend 2:

Catalysing social media activism

Social movements took social media by storm in 2020. Activism exploded overnight and intensified calls for the corporate world to get involved. This left many companies scrambling to determine their position and prepare communications with limited time and insight on how to appropriately respond to an increasingly unforgiving audience.



2020 isn't the first time that we've seen intensified social media activism, however the sustained and influential nature of movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and the Facebook #StopHateForProfit boycott make 2020 unique. These movements have triggered significant action from corporate companies as reactive statements are no longer enough to satisfy audience demands. As a result, businesses have begun to address their core values and purpose to ensure audiences are convinced of their long-term commitments and authenticity.

Against this backdrop where the only certainty is more social media activism, there are key considerations for corporates:

- ✓ How do they ensure that they stay on the front foot?
- ✓ What is their role in shaping and contributing to these movements?
- ✓ What is the decision-making process for knowing how and when to engage?
- ✓ What policies need to be in place to guide engagement?
- ✓ What does a meaningful and authentic response look like?



In 2021, audience trust will always be at a 'make or break' point

2020's social media movements and catalysts like COVID-19 have brought corporate values and actions into sharp focus, creating a 'make or break' tipping point for audience trust.

When exploring the role of companies in these movements, here are some areas to consider:

- 1. Audiences demand authentic values:**

Reactive statements devoid of ensuing action simply don't pass muster with modern digital audiences.

Recent research found that 68% of US consumers find it important that brands make it clear what values they stand for, demonstrating that knowing which issues align with these values and which to speak on is more important than ever.
- 2. The conversation bubbles on:**

Major societal movements such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter continue to drive large volumes of online discussion every week (+5m mentions p/week) regardless of the mainstream news cycle.

This consistent discussion necessitates a similarly consistent and longer-term commitment from companies looking to address the issues.
- 3. Activists see brands as potential allies:**

Research found that both activists and PR professionals believe CEOs are more influential in initiating social change than politicians – seeing opportunities to work together to achieve mutual beneficial goals.

Corporate companies should identify and evaluate which causes they're aligned to and where they can make a positive difference.
- 4. A flash in the pan:**

The #StopHateForProfit Facebook boycott saw over 1,000 advertisers publicly withdraw their advertising on Facebook. While this may seem like a momentous event that separated the 'box-tickers' from the genuinely committed, public interest in the boycott fell quickly.

This signals that to drive real value, audiences are looking for sustained commitments over participation in one-off events.
- 5. A much broader audience:**

Research shows that there are a range of individuals participating in online activism with the "average citizen" beginning to discover a newfound power.

Businesses must recognise that different causes will capture different nations. Companies must get to know a much broader audience base, understand the segments and know how to communicate with them.

Trend 3: Exploding digital footprints

In 2020, we've observed employees sharing company culture experiences across a broader range of social media channels, blurring the lines between personal and professional platform engagement. This development is a double-edged sword for companies, offering an opportunity to showcase positive company culture and foster employee advocacy, while also exposing them to reputational risks of potential rogue employees.

TikTok has entered the workplace like no social media platform before it, changing the nature of content shared at work. Previously limited to a tweet from a desk or an Instagram photo from a Christmas party, we're now seeing supermarket dance battles such as the Wes Nelson [See Nobody challenge](#) where supermarket chains battled each other, to behind the scenes videos of what it's like to work at McDonalds being shared by employees - content that has the power to shape the external impression of a company culture in a positive or negative light.

Glassdoor has also increased in popularity among employees, enabling them to share personal company experiences, and therefore shaping the public window into the inner workings of a company. This is attracting the attention of media and investors and, as a result, companies are increasing their engagement and focus on the platform as a communications channel rather than a traditional HR or recruitment channel.

The increased and changed uses of social media brings new reputational considerations for corporates and while sustaining employee engagement is tricky at the best of times, the shifting circumstances of COVID-19 and the personal challenges that come alongside them make it even more challenging to engage a remote workforce.



Managing your digital footprint is becoming increasingly difficult

2020 has extended the corporate digital footprint across new channels and introduced new types of employee behaviours; some of which carry an increased level of reputational risk.

This brings new challenges that businesses must consider and seek to overcome:



Ease of virality

Unlike other social media platforms, TikTok's algorithm doesn't take into consideration the performance of your previous posts and is also designed for videos to be seen on the 'for you' page by multiple people. These features are considered to help content go viral on the platform.

Hard to track

TikTok's closed API adds an additional layer of complexity when tracking and controlling content. This poses a risk to businesses, and already, the UK's big four supermarkets have content attributed to their brand with over 99m views.

Headline hitting

In 2020 so far, there have been over 12k social media news posts globally referencing employees using TikTok; companies are at risk of employee-generated TikTok content unwittingly hitting the headlines.



Company culture must be addressed internally

99 of the FTSE 100 companies have a Glassdoor page, however only 66 are 'Engaged Employers' meaning they've claimed their page and are actively using it. We found that Engaged Employers received a higher number of reviews (an average of 20 in comparison to 8 per month), however this doesn't necessarily translate into positivity. Only if your business is truly focused on creating a positive company culture, will that be reflected in your employee reviews.

Climbing employee engagement

The FTSE 100 receive an average of 16 reviews per month – with users even leaving reviews on Christmas Day and other major holidays!

COVID catalyst for employee-engagement

During COVID-19, the number of reviews being left on Glassdoor has increased. While reviews dropped initially during the height of the pandemic, they've been growing in volume month by month since.



Example: Fresno airport – dancing with fire

In February, four Fresno Airport workers filmed a TikTok dance whilst at work. While the video gained little traction, airport management made the decision to sack all four men upon discovering it.

The creators claimed that the video was one which created a great sense of positivity and didn't get in the way of their duties – the internet agreed and showed support.

A fan page was set-up for the workers with a re-post of the video, which had previously been deleted. The account generated 176k views, 29k likes and over 500 shares. Comments were re-uploaded and people re-engaged with the video.

The video originally gained a low level of engagement, however the airport's decision to sack their employees added fuel to the fire. This example highlights the risk of Employee Generated Content on TikTok, and the need for companies to have clear social media policies and governance procedures in place.



What this means for 2021 comms strategies?

Managing the digital opportunities and challenges of these 2021 trends will require organisations to have a clearly defined purpose and strategy alongside a tactical framework to bring it to life. Here are the core areas to consider:

1. Use advanced data and analytics to understand your operating environment

Understand the changing needs of audiences

2020 has caused the instant reconfiguration of some sectors with changing audience needs and concerns. Auditing your digital audiences and emerging issues will help you to understand your current environment and respond appropriately.

Refresh and evolve your strategy

Your social media activity needs to incorporate your purpose and values. Strategies will often not need to change, but it's important to constantly review and refresh them in line with changing audience attitudes and behaviours.

Measure your success

With added strain on many sectors, proving the value of communications is crucial. Understanding and optimising that value requires a robust measurement framework that captures internal and external audiences and integrates all areas of the communications strategy.

2. Create the right infrastructure to secure and protect your position

Know the full extent of your digital footprint

Ensure that robust governance is in place with access to data that will enable you to track your online footprint – without any blind spots. This will enable you to engage in an informed, measured and effective way.

Now is the time to introduce a TikTok policy

With the rise of TikTok, social media guidelines should include specific guidance for TikTok and creating content at work. Situations such as that concerning Fresno Airport will likely only become more common.

Define a response process

Create a decision-making framework which includes guidance around issue escalation and engaging the right stakeholders. This should ultimately ensure that your team is empowered to respond quickly and effectively to whatever situation arises.

Monitor the conversations

Use data and analytics to stay abreast of changing shifts in your core audiences' attitudes and behaviours. Ensure that you receive a holistic view from across geographies that will enable you to react at speed to quickly evolving situations.

3. Empower, upskill and engage internal and external stakeholders

Educate on risk

Upskill and educate your workforce on the 2021 landscape as it relates to the business, its stakeholders and digital engagement. This will enable them to better protect themselves, their colleagues and your company when engaging on social media.

Engage and empower

Inspire colleagues to engage on social media in a positive way by providing them with guidelines that won't interfere with their personal life. These guidelines should be linked to social media policies ensuring that their activity empowers them yet won't bring harm to your company or individuals.

What next?

2020 has been a unique year and the events that took place were impossible to predict. No one can know for sure what 2021 holds but if 2020 has taught us anything, it's to be prepared for the unexpected.

Equip your business through evolving your digital strategy – address the intrinsic questions sooner rather than later, plan around unique scenarios, put the right infrastructure in place to enable your business to respond to the quickly evolving environment, understand your changing audiences on a much deeper level and empower your teams.



Get on the front foot for 2021.



Strategic Communications



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