



**2021**

**Porter Novelli  
Business & Social Justice Study**

## 2020 was a year of reckoning. 2021 demands progress.

2020 will go down in history as a defining moment and catalyst in the long fight for social justice. It was a year of awakening for some, acknowledgement for others and activism for many, but above all, it was a year of reckoning. 2020 demanded change.

For some companies, change had been brewing for years. Yet, for many, 2020 put brands on notice – some for the first time. Consumers, employees and other stakeholders charged companies to acknowledge their role in systemic injustices – and actively change the system.

Now, it's time to make good on promises made.

## **SOCIAL JUSTICE EVOLUTION: 2020 TO 2021**

Last year, Porter Novelli conducted a series of Trackers asking questions around social justice; Justice, Equity, Diversity & Inclusion (JEDI); sustainability; COVID-19 and other timely topics between the months of April and September. As we developed a study on the topic of social justice in 2021, we knew we'd see shifts. Social justice continues to take over our news feeds and media on a daily basis, but the conversation is different than it was when we polled Americans on this topic in June and July of 2020 – when the wounds were more fresh, the pain more acute and the streets filled with daily protests. With that in mind, the data we collected in April 2021 was more nuanced.

While social justice is still a critical issue Americans expect companies to address, there was not quite the same fervor in support from 2020. A note of fatigue, or a once-emotional response is now working its way into the daily psyche of our news and communities. This naturally solicits a more status quo response as a level of exhaustion sets in. Further, while understanding progress takes time, Americans may be expressing a frustration and discontent toward the lack of seismic action from companies, organizations and institutions like. It is no time to let up when it comes to addressing social ills and taking authentic action, as this cohort still represents a major portion of the population that expects companies to engage, act and improve.

This new reality also represents a call to action for companies. As outlined in the report, performative, hollow and quick-out-the-gate statements are no longer going to cut it in the eyes of Americans. Companies should be thoughtful in their responses to issues – and ensure that activations and actions come to life in a way that is uniquely authentic to the brand, not just another blanket statement on social media. Now is the time for companies to show progress. We know Americans are watching.

### **ABOUT THE RESEARCH**

This survey was fielded online via Dynata between April 16-18, 2021 among a total sample of 1,000 U.S. general market adults age 18+. The data were weighted to U.S. Census population estimates.

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# Business & Social Justice

## A WAKE-UP CALL FOR CORPORATE AMERICA

Although the fight for social justice has been a slow march over years and decades, 2020 has been punctuated in the minds of Americans, and the consumer-company relationship has been forever transformed. No longer can companies be on the sidelines when the world is reeling. Indeed, Americans believe this time has forced organizations to confront their own roles in perpetuating systems of inequality and oppression. Sixty-four percent of individuals think the past year has made companies understand their role in addressing systemic racism.

Yet, for Americans, there is a sense that it shouldn't have taken this long (or so many incidents of violence, pain, sorrow and anger) for companies to see they could be instrumental in disrupting the status quo. Nearly seven-in-10 (69%) individuals say it shouldn't take a tragedy like the murder of George Floyd or the recent salon killings in Atlanta, Georgia for companies to care. Nearly the same amount still question whether companies are firmly set in the reactive court when it comes to speaking up - with sixty-seven percent (67%) of individuals stating they think companies wait until a social justice issue is headline news before they are willing to talk about it.



**69%**

**say it shouldn't take a massive tragedy for companies to care about social justice issues**

## FROM PROMISES TO PROGRESS

Further, as we move toward the year marker when many companies promised massive change, Americans are keeping a keen eye on the progress that was promised. More than half (54%) of individuals say they are watching to see how brands have made progress in addressing social justice issues, and 45 percent have gone so far as to do research to see what companies have done to make headway against the commitments they made over the past year. This push for progress and accountability is rooted in the belief that companies can be instrumental in creating the change that is so immensely needed. Sixty percent of Americans are optimistic that as companies begin to address social justice issues, we will see real change.



**60%**

**are optimistic that as companies begin to address social justice issues, we will see real change**

# Building The Business Case

## THE BUSINESS AND MORAL MANDATE

If there was any question that companies must proactively address social justice issues, ponder no more. Americans maintain the mandate that companies not only participate in the process, but also be a driving force in progress moving forward. Two-thirds (66%) of Americans believe companies have a role to play in addressing social justice issues – and six-in-10 expect them to go further by taking the lead (59%).

Beyond a strong moral imperative, Americans have created a built-in business case for companies to get involved. Sixty-six percent of Americans believe it's good for business when companies address social justice issues – and perhaps that is because individuals are prepared to put their power behind brands that align with them on important issues. Six-in-10 (61%) said they will reward companies that actively address social justice issues.



**66%**

**of Americans believe it's good for business for companies to address social justice issues**

## BENEFITS TO LEADING

Americans are wielding their wallets and voices to support companies that are truly driving progress against the societal issues they care about. Sixty-seven percent said they'd support those companies by purchasing products, while the same amount said they'd be more likely to trust the company. Myriad other benefits include increased loyalty, likelihood to recommend, willingness to defend and even a propensity to feel a deeper emotional connection with the company. This propensity to reward also flows into the job market - as six-in-10 (59%) Americans said they'd want to work for companies creating seismic social change.

**TABLE 1.**

**Americans would support a company speaking up for and addressing social justice issues in the following ways:**

<b>67%</b> Purchase a product from that company	<b>62%</b> Defend that company if someone spoke badly of it
<b>67%</b> Trust that company	<b>61%</b> Feel a deeper emotional connection with that company
<b>64%</b> Be more loyal to that company	<b>59%</b> Want to work for that company
<b>63%</b> Recommend that company to others	

Although the benefits for companies to engage on these issues are numerous, companies that need added incentive to take a position must know this: 48 percent of Americans also said they will punish companies that do not actively address social justice issues by boycotting or speaking out against them.



# Social Justice Communications

## SILENCE IS NO LONGER AN OPTION

Although in the past many companies may have avoided divisive conversations to protect their reputations, the message from Americans is loud and clear: today, silence can at the minimum be construed as indifference, and at its worst – complicity. Six-in-10 (59%) individuals say it is no longer acceptable for companies to be silent on social justice issues, and a further forty-nine percent say they assume companies that remain quiet on social justice issues don't care. Yet, this push to get companies to speak up is rooted in the belief that corporate marketing and communications can be influential.

Americans believe companies have a powerful platform that can drive conversations, change minds and even actions. Sixty-two percent of individuals believe companies can help normalize social justice conversations through their marketing and communications. A further 60 percent say that when companies talk about social justice issues, it can actually help prevent further violence or prejudices.



**62%**

**believe companies can help  
normalize social justice  
conversations through marketing  
and communications**

**TABLE 2.**

**Americans will look at these channels to find out what a company is doing around social justice issues:**



<b>31%</b>	Social media	<b>26%</b>	Employees
<b>30%</b>	Company website	<b>20%</b>	In the store/on product package
<b>27%</b>	Leadership/CEO	<b>15%</b>	Newsletters

## **BREAKING BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATIONS**

Now, companies have not only the permission, but also the directive to use their megaphones to participate in important conversations. Although some companies can be hesitant to speak out for fear of saying the wrong thing, Americans are remarkably forgiving. More than three-quarters (76%) of individuals say a company doesn't have to be perfect when talking about social justice issues, but it should be open and honest. A further 73 percent value humility and honesty over perfection when companies talk about social justice issues.

Americans also make clear that all companies are invited – even those that may not have participated in the conversation before. Two-thirds (66%) of individuals say they appreciate when companies they haven't heard from before join the dialogue. The key to new company engagement around these issues is authenticity, humility and transparency. A further 66 percent of Americans agree that a company that is new to addressing social justice issues must be modest and show a willingness to change, as well as be authentic and own past mistakes (72%).

## COMMUNICATIONS BACKED BY ACTION

While all companies are invited to authentically engage in social justice conversations, this comes with new levels of accountability – and companies must be prepared do the work. Statements must be backed by action and commitments paired with progress. Six-out-of-10 (60%) Americans say when a company makes a statement of support, they will hold that company accountable. Even here, individuals understand that this is a journey. Two-thirds (66%) of Americans know true change won't happen immediately, but it's important to see progress from companies.



**66%**

**understand true change won't happen immediately, but it's important to see progress from companies**



# Demonstrating Action

## EFFECTIVE ACTION IN 2021

It is clear Americans are growing tired of declarations from brands that are performative and hollow. Action is required to truly achieve authenticity in this conversation. Indeed, 63 percent of individuals now say companies can no longer make a statement of support without also showing their actions to address social justice issues. But how, exactly, do Americans expect companies to follow through? Americans cited diversifying hiring and promoting, establishing Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) policies for internal change and pushing to change government policies or regulations to make them more equitable when asked the top three ways companies should take action. Here, we see how Americans understand that there is much work to be done – and great opportunity – within a company’s own four walls. And further, how corporate involvement in political conversations can be a powerful tool to sway public policy.

**TABLE 3.**

**Americans expect companies to take action to address social justice issues in the following ways:**

<b>1.</b> Diversify hiring and promoting	<b>7.</b> Donate to nonprofits specifically addressing systemic issues in society
<b>2.</b> Establish JEDI policies for internal change	<b>8.</b> Draw attention to lesser-known social justice issues
<b>3.</b> Push to change government policies or regulations to make them more equitable	<b>9.</b> Commit to working with more diverse suppliers
<b>4.</b> Communicate around social justice issues	<b>10.</b> Hold senior leaders accountable for JEDI progress
<b>5.</b> Use their brand power to make people aware of systemic social justice issues	<b>11.</b> Partner with issue experts or leaders from diverse communities
<b>6.</b> Innovate products and services to better serve diverse customers	

# Internal Impetus Through JEDI

## UNDERSTANDING INTERNAL IMPACT

Justice, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (JEDI) work is a critical way for companies to show their commitment to the issues – and demonstrable progress and impact. Americans believe in the concept of “getting your house in order” – as nearly two-thirds (64%) say companies must first start making JEDI progress internally, before speaking out on issues externally. Nearly the same amount (65%) think companies that have strong JEDI policies actually have more credibility to engage in social justice conversations more broadly.

Americans would also like to see companies continue to push and innovate JEDI strategies internally. Six-in-10 (62%) want to see companies proactively evolve their JEDI strategies and communications – and 63 percent want to see these strategies be less reactive and more proactive. Americans are also sophisticated in their understanding of the spectrum JEDI encompasses and want the same from organizations – two-thirds (66%) of individuals believe companies need to address all forms of JEDI rather than focusing on just one area (e.g., just race or just sexuality).

Americans see how internal JEDI commitments and strategies can manifest externally. Two-thirds of individuals say company’s marketing and advertising should be more reflective of the diverse and inclusive business they aspire to be and a further 64 percent agree a company’s senior leadership composition should also mirror this commitment to diversity and inclusion. These are two indicators Americans look for to understand a company’s true commitment to progress.



**65%**

**think companies that have strong JEDI policies have more credibility to engage in social justice conversations more broadly**

# Employee Perspectives

## ACTIVISM IN THE OFFICE

The age of the activist employee is upon us – and individuals are keeping a keen eye on if and how their employer is joining the social justice movement. In fact, more than half (58%) of employees today say they hold their employer to a higher standard than other companies when it comes to addressing social justice issues. This is because employees are feeling the impact of these issues on a very personal level – as 57 percent want their company to address social justice issues that impact them personally. For some employees, a company's participation (or lack thereof) in tackling social justice issues could be a deal breaker. In fact, 43 percent of employees today say they are reconsidering their current job because their company is not doing enough to address these topics externally.



# 43%

**of employees are reconsidering their current job because their company is not doing enough to address social justice issues externally**

**The message from a majority of Americans is clear: Silence is no longer an option. Inaction is considered unacceptable. Proof of progress is essential.**

As this nation continues its social justice journey, Americans understand that business is a critical part of this process. And, while there is work to be done, Americans are pushing companies because there is vast potential. They see that business can be a force for change – that it has the capability, scale, innovation and ability to create the seismic and systemic shifts that are necessary for the progress needed. They see the levers business possess are myriad – from internal change, to marketing and communications power, to the ability to influence policy and so much more. Now is the time for business to seize this mandate and take the lead.

## ABOUT PORTER NOVELLI

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