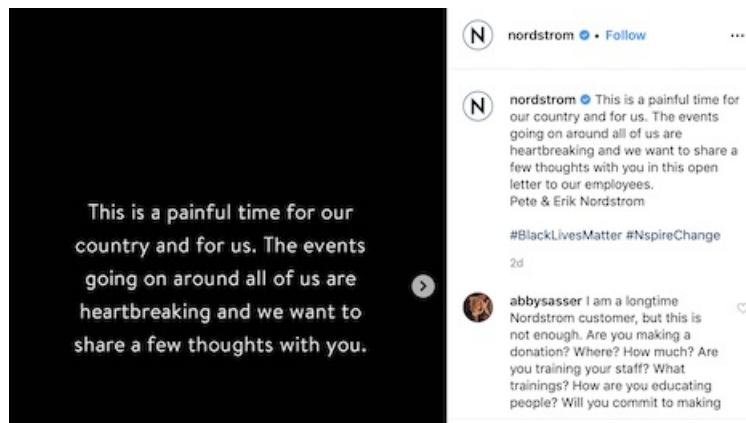


MARKETING

How should brands participate in social movements?

June 3, 2020



Nordstrom's Instagram message on #BlackOutTuesday says: "This is a painful time for our country." Image credit: Nordstrom

By DIANNA DILWORTH

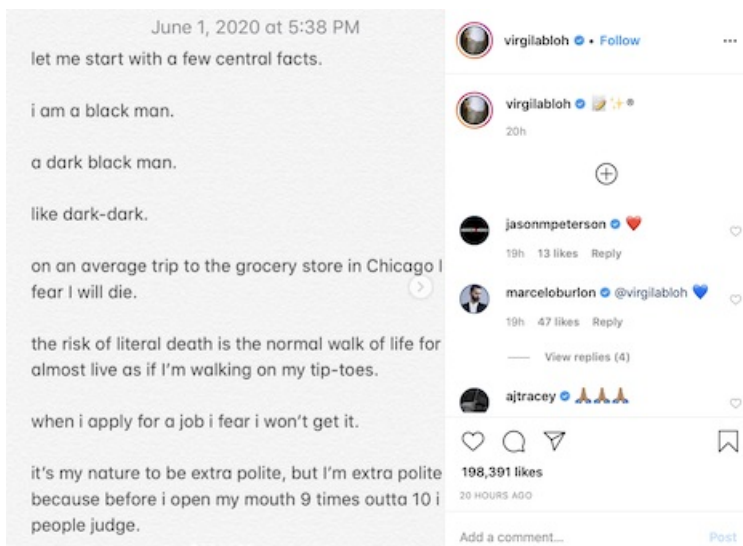
Luxury brands have taken to social media to support Black Lives Matter in the United States in a move to show support for human rights after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis police custody.

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Business analysts are calling on brands to take things one step forward and engage in these conversations about racism to make progress in social justice within their companies, because staying silent will not help. In a livestream on [LinkedIn](#), Charlene Li, founder/senior fellow at [Altimeter](#), a Prophet company based in San Francisco, shared words of wisdom.

"Watching the death of George Floyd and the unfolding crisis, we long for leadership," Ms. Li said. "This moment requires disruptive leadership because that's what leaders do we disrupt the status quo.

"That's uncomfortable on so many levels yet we must find our voice and lead in our organizations and communities," she said.



Louis Vuitton's first African-American artistic director Virgil Abloh's Instagram apology. Image credit: Virgil Abloh

Uncomfortable conversations

Participating in the social media movement is not without risk, as consumers can call out brands they feel are inauthentically participating in a social movement. But that has not stopped some, including U.S. department store chain Nordstrom ([see story](#)).

"We need change," read [Nordstrom's post](#). "As a company, we know we have the opportunity to make things better, which is why over the past several years we've amplified our efforts when it comes to diversity, inclusion and belonging at Nordstrom.

"It begins not only by speaking out, but by listening," the post continued. "Listening to our employees, customers and neighbors as they share what it's like to be a person of color in our country today.

"It's working to ensure our teams and leaders represent the diversity we seek. It's providing each and every customer who walks in our door the service and experience they expect and deserve to receive at Nordstrom."

Nordstrom's post of support for the Black Lives Matter movement has generated more than 40,000 likes, but it also includes comments from a woman naming a store where she experienced discrimination.

But brands should be willing to have these uncomfortable conversations to show true commitment to weeding out racism within their companies.

"Three things to do and model right now: 1) Practice empathy; 2) Dare to have difficult conversations; 3) Address concerns with humanity," Ms. Li said.

"In this process, you will find your voice and act even though you know it will be imperfect," she said. "Action is needed because staying silent means we are part of the problem."

During heated times, brands should be thoughtful before responding. Quick responses on social media by a brand or even employees can quickly shine a bad light or put them in the hot seat.

Virgil Abloh, Louis Vuitton's first African American artistic director for menswear and founder/CEO of Italian fashion house [Off-White](#), had to apologize after expressing his frustration over looting on social media.

Mr. Abloh's friend, Sean Wotherspoon, shared a photo of his Los Angeles vintage sneaker store Round Two after it had been looted.

"This is fked up. You see the passion, blood, sweat and tears Sean puts in for our culture," Mr. Abloh wrote. "This disgusts me. To the kids that ransacked his store and RSVP DTLA, and all our stores in our scene just know, that product staring at you in your home/apartment right now is tainted and a reminder of a person I hope you aren't."

Mr. Abloh had to apologize and clarify his point of view.

"I apologize that my comments yesterday appeared as if my main concerns are anything other than full solidarity with the movements against police violence, racism and inequality," he wrote.

"Yesterday I spoke about how my stores and stores of friends were looted," he continued. "I apologize that it seemed like my concern for those stores outweighed my concern for our right to protest injustice and express our anger and

rage in this moment."



Dior's Instagram message on #BlackOutTuesday. Image credit: Dior

Not about you

During this time, some experts say brands should not be considering how these messages are on brand.

As is evident in the response this week, it may be time for brands to show up and support anti-racist actions and listen to ways they can improve their workplaces and customers' experiences to be more inclusive to people of color.

"Any attempt to stay on-brand is irrelevant and offensive," said Thoma Serdari, New York-based director of fashion and luxury at [Brand\(x\)Lux](#), professor at NYU Stern and co-editor of [Luxury: History Culture Consumption](#).

"Brands should join in by expressing their support the same way a person would, from the heart," she said.

"What matters now is a united front against injustice and criminal behavior that hurts minorities. Getting involved or not is not an issue of risks, it is a matter of solidarity with humanity."

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