

Luxury brands and climate protests: employee engagement and protection

03 MARCH 2020

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As sustainability continues to lead the fashion conversation, luxury fashion brands are under increasing pressure to clean up their environmental footprint. Protests, like those recently staged by Extinction Rebellion outside London Fashion Week, will continue – and are likely to escalate – unless brands take steps to address the issue. Alongside reviewing their policies and manufacturing processes, brands must be prepared to respond to protests positively and proactively, to protect their staff and to deal with any difficult situations presented.

Protecting your staff

Organisations should consider appointing someone to monitor online activity including all social media channels for protests that might affect your business premises, event or reputation. This information allows managers to take a proactive approach, whether that be arranging additional security, advising staff to use an alternative entrance or dealing with PR and corporate communications. While every brand will want to engage positively, staff safety must not be compromised and additional measures might be necessary, especially where a protest lasts for a sustained period of time. For instance, animal cruelty activists protested outside Canada Goose on Regent Street in London for over a year after its opening in 2018.

Organisations may also want to give briefings and media relations training to senior staff and spokespersons. This will help to encourage a clear and consistent message across the organisation and ensure that all staff understand, and can promote, the brand's position in relation to sustainability. Given the current temperature around climate and environmental issues, it is important that any brand is seen to engage positively and sensitively. Staff who find themselves working in close proximity to protestors may also need additional guidance on their use of social media, including the effective use of privacy settings, especially if they could be targeted online and their accounts are linked to the brand or industry.

The importance of staying on top of company policies, such as the Modern Slavery Statement and the nature of the organisation's supply chain, should also not be forgotten.

Employee participation in protests

Staff may also wish to attend protests, or take part in campaigns themselves. Where an organisation such as Extinction Rebellion has a number of strands to their message, looking to ban or discourage staff from attending a protest is likely to be met with resistance and could result in disagreement and could be reflected negatively in the media. Striking a balance between your staff's right to privacy and freedom of speech on the one hand, and their duty of loyalty to the organisation and protecting the brand's reputation on the other, is key. Clear guidance on what staff should and should not do will help ensure that their activities outside of work do not pose an unacceptable risk to the brand. Clear communication can also ensure issues are responded to promptly and mitigate against any potential reputational damage.

You may want to remind staff that there may be serious implications should they be charged with or convicted of a criminal offence relating to protest activity. This is of course a sensitive area as many individuals feel very strongly about environmental impact, so we would advise that employee communications are handled with appropriate care. Specialist employment advice should also be sought before taking disciplinary action against an employee as a result of criminal charges or convictions.

Finally, highly publicised protests will undoubtedly be topics of conversation in the workplace and can lead to differing views becoming more polarised. Organisations must be prepared to diffuse arguments between staff in the workplace and be alert to – and promptly address – any instances of staff being bullied or harassed for their views.

Sustainability is affecting all aspects of business, and not just how goods are made or transported. Striking the right balance between ensuring


that your employees are protected, whilst also offering flexibility to exercise their right to free speech, is vital if you are to effectively manage the implications of climate change protests on your business and your brand.


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