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case 7-445-121
July 14, 2021

Oiselle: How Does an Activist Brand Authentically Commit to Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion?

As manager of public affairs for Oiselle, Emily Jenkinsⁱ sat in her makeshift office in December 2020 as she reflected on the initiatives she and her team had launched in the past year. Oiselle, a women's running apparel brand, was founded with a mission centered on women's empowerment. In the past months, Oiselle had joined a runners diversity coalition started by endurance athlete and activist Alison Désir. Oiselle also had partnered with Désir's organization Run 4 All Women on the "Womxn Run the Vote Relay" to raise money for Black Voters Matter, a group dedicated to registering Black voters and elevating awareness regarding racially motivated voter suppression.

It was not the first time Oiselle had called attention to social issues. For example, Oiselle's athlete sponsorship model directly challenged the status quo set by brands like Nike that reduced or eliminated pay for pregnant athletes. As a purpose-driven brand, Oiselle usually moved quickly to support issues that mattered to its employees. Jenkins was proud that the company and the leadership team prioritized its values over profits.

Following the police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020, companies across the country were supporting the Black Lives Matter movement with corporate statements and donations. Some of these were clearly marketing gimmicks to capitalize on consumer sentiments, but others appeared as authentic commitments to change. According to a PwC study, companies that "do little/say little" and those that "say a lot/but reality falls short" were at higher risk of reputational damage as it pertained to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).¹ Especially in the social media era, companies who had jumped on a bandwagon for DEI, but had not internalized the principles within their own business, were at risk for more backlash. They had used DEI as a marketing tactic rather than to address a pressing societal problem.

As consumers increasingly held companies accountable for aligning their actions to values, Jenkins realized Oiselle needed to assess how it contributed to furthering diverse representation, equitable treatment of athletes, and inclusivity in the industry. As a brand founded on principles of women's empowerment,

ⁱ Emily Jenkins is a fictional character.

Published by WDI Publishing, a division of the William Davidson Institute (WDI) at the University of Michigan.

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