

The Art & Science Of Marketing Woke

By
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“So...what you’re saying is that there is no such thing as a ‘woke corporation’?”, Christopher Nicholas said as he buried his beefy face in his equally beefy palms.

It just wasn’t fun anymore. Nicholas, a premier GOP consultant in Pennsylvania, had built a considerable name for himself in state politics.

He was a bit of a local legend in the Keystone State.

One of Nicholas’ resume-worthy accomplishments was overseeing former Sen. Arlen Specter's \$21 million re-election campaign in 2004, which ranked among the country's most contentious Senate races.

In his role as campaign manager, he had implemented successful Independent expenditure programs nationwide.

In US politics, an independent expenditure is a campaign communication. It can advocate - or oppose - a specific candidate. But - and here's the rub - it is not made in coordination with the candidate. For that matter, it is supposed to be independent of any authorized committee or the party. Wink. Wink.

That restriction is - of course - bypassed. Being a clever minx, a candidate will bypass campaign finance rules by delaying stating the intention to run for office. Instead, the candidate forms an exploratory committees. Wink. Wink. Exploratory committees had been in existence well before the advent of super PACs. But that sly candidate will get a head-start. While the original intent was that an exploratory committee "test the waters", that clever candidate uses it to raise money above what is set out in the federal candidate contribution limits and restrictions. And, since the candidate has not officially declared, an independent expenditure is a coordinated part of the fund raising (for the campaign that doesn't exist while existing).

And Nicholas’ independent expenditure programs were the best independent expenditure programs. That is why he was a legend in the Keystone State.

Currently, he was informally advising Douglas Mastriano – who recently failed in bid for Pennsylvania Governor – as he “tested the waters” in his bid for the Senate (which was doomed to fail). His previous campaign failed for several reasons. He was a Christian Nationalist and that was a hard sell south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Other things about Mastriano were also hard sells. He had written social media posts about QAnon and had spoken at events that promoted QAnon and 9/11 conspiracy theories. Mastriano was a fervent Trump supporter. Trump had just been pasted by Biden in the 2020 election. It was a close race - 50.01% to 48.84% - but was jumbled up with all of the other baggage.

Nicholas wasn’t even getting paid for the consult: he was just doing it to try to maintain goodwill in a rapidly changing GOP. Damn, it just wasn’t fun anymore. The Party used to stand for things, small government and traditional values, and now it was just Wednesday at a poorly-lit office.

“So...what you’re saying is that there is no such thing as a ‘woke corporation’?”, Nicholas dumbly repeated.

He was on a Zoom call with Dr. Radnor. Radnor was a tenured professor at Penn State in the Marketing department.

Radnor exhaled loudly, clearly frustrated.

"I'm sorry, Mike. My...client...is really big on this whole 'corporations are going woke' bit. And what he wants to hear – and, sadly, a lot of consultation is just saying what the client wants to hear. I was hoping to red things up. I wanted to be prepared for our next meeting.

Red things up.

Dr Radnor was familiar with that bit of Pennsylvanian slang.

"Well, my friend, there is nothing to 'tidy up'. There is no thing as a 'woke corporation'. I follow the news. I know the GOP is going on about this. DeSantis is really big on it. But...it's bullshit."

Nicholas leaned back in his chair:

"Go back to what you saying about 'market segmentation'.

"Sure.", Radnor replied. "That means splitting a large audience into categories – groups. Then we tailor a message for each group that attract individuals in those respective groups."

"Ok...ok...I get that.", Nicholas said. "And what does that have to do with 'corporations can't be woke'.

"Ok...as an aside...I still don't know what the fuck 'woke'..."

"Neither do I.", Nicholas concurred. "Currently...I'm dealing a crop of, good lord, colorful people. Woke is a thing to them. A big thing. But let's just say that 'woke' is a synonym for liberal. Why can't a corporation be liberal?"

"A corporation is a business.", Radnor explained. "A big business. As such, it simply wants to sell its products...goods or services. It doesn't want to alienate anyone".

"Okay. But it does seem to be the case that corporations are taking political sides. On the Disney show, *Ms. Marvel*, the superhero is a Muslim. Now, I personally don't give a shit if you make the character Muslim, Jewish or – hell – atheist. But it does feel like a political statement. And my clients certainly think it is."

"Good...good...a streaming service is a great example of what I'm getting.", Radnor said with an unexpected burst of enthusiasm. "Remind me about that, if I forget, but let's go back to 'market segmentation'."

Nicholas took a sip of coffee and shrugged deferentially.

Radnor continued:

“So, we have two very groups – the political left and right – and they don’t agree on anything. And it really is about a hell of a lot more than politics. Abortion. LGBT. It’s also about issues of ethics and just how people live.”

“Ok...check.”

“The market segmentation approach tells us that a corporation should simply craft an appeal to each group. Do you remember ‘Virginia Slims’ cigarettes from the ‘70s?”

Nicholas nodded.

It had slogans like "You've come a long way, baby." and "It's a woman thing." Of course, that’s bullshit. It was stupid tobacco. Tobacco is tobacco. The opposite of ‘market segmentation’ is ‘undifferentiated marketing’. That means that you just blast out a single message to everyone...based on the distinctive features of your product. Tobacco is tobacco. A cigarette is a cigarette, Nothing is distinctive. So you market using group appeal. Virginia Slims for women and the Marlboro Man for the guys.”

“Ok...and you’re saying that a corporation can’t do separate appeals to the left and the right?, Nicholas asked.

“Right. Men and women are compatible.” Radnor said and added with a snorting laugh: “sort of.”.

He leaned back and continued with enhanced emphasis:

“But, the left and the right are not compatible. They are at war with each other. Civil strife is a real possibility. If a corporation were to do a separate appeal to each side, it would only piss off both groups.”

“Fine...fine.”, Nicholas said. “But what does that have to do with you saying, ‘a corporation can’t be woke’?”

“Politically, we are so divided that corporations are taking sides. And they are siding with the left.”

“Why?”, Nicholas asked.

“Well, before I answer that, I honestly feel that the right brought this to head. DeSantis with his ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill. Politicians like Marjorie Taylor Greene and Lauren Boebert constantly saying crazy and divisive shit. The January 6 insurrection...I’m not offending you, am I?”

“No.”, Nicholas said as he thought about dimly lit offices. “Okay...but why does a corporation have to pick sides...the Libs over...me?”

“The left is more educated. According to Pew, in a 2019 study, 41% of people who belong to the Democratic Party – or lean left – have a Bachelors or better. And with the Republican or leaning crowd? The number is 29%. And...on the left side...28% only have a HS education. On the right side, it’s 35%.”

“And, the more educated you are, the more money you’re likely to earn.”, Nicholas said with his eyes closed as a wave of psychic pain shot through him.”

“Exactly. And conservatives are exasperating the trend. Ben Shapiro wrote a book called “Brainwashed: How Universities Indoctrinate America's Youth” and then there’s “Illiberal Education: Political Correctness and the College Experience”...that one’s by Dinesh D'Souza. I mean the titles alone are keeping young conservatives away from getting a good education...which trashes their earning power...and that further undercuts their power.”

“Uh...huh.”, Nicholas said in a quiet and deflated tone.

“More bad news...”, Radnor continued. “Young people are trending away from you on the issues. According to a 2022 Pew, 54% of people 65 or older think that abortion should be legal in all or most cases. And with the 18-to-29 set, that jumps to 74%.”

“Yeah...yeah...yeah...I get it. Corporations aren’t going woke. They’re just holding a mirror up to society.”

“Hey...I’m sorry, man.”, Radnor said.

“No...that’s cool. That’s why I’m talking to you. For your expertise. But...what were saying about streaming services...like Disney?”

“Well...if you’re living from paycheck to paycheck...and the right is far less educated than the left...you tend to pay closer attention to budgeting. A streaming is an expense. Sure...we’re just talking 10 or 20 a month. But, if you’re tight, every penny count. So...in a situation were you can appeal to one side...even a streaming service will cater to the more educated group...the group with discretionary money.”

“And Gen Z is trending that way as well...”

“Yeah...so if you only have a high school degree...or just some community college...you stick to the free streamers. Sure, you have to watch those damn commercials...like back in the day of the ‘big 3’. The freebies have some good shit. Peacock has that original called ‘Poker Face’ ...it’s by the guy that did the movie ‘Knives Out’...”

“Sure...I haven’t seen it. I’m sure it’s fucking great.”

From there, the conversation devolved into small talk. And Nicholas found himself thinking about dimly lit offices.

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