

GUIDING CEO STANCES THE COMMUNICATORS' ROLE



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CEOs worldwide are increasingly speaking out on pressing sociopolitical issues. This trend raises an important question: Are these public stances carefully orchestrated communication strategies, or do they genuinely reflect CEOs' personal convictions? This article, which is part of a larger doctoral research project at the University of Vienna, presents findings on the relationship between CEOs and communication practitioners. In particular, it delves into the decision-making, management, planning, and the essential skills communication professionals need to effectively craft and guide their CEOs' public stances on sociopolitical issues. A key outcome of this research is a typology to support communication practitioners reflect on their roles and relationship to the CEO when navigating the complex landscape of sociopolitical communication.



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BEYOND BUSINESS: CEOS ABANDONING CORPORATE NEUTRALITY

“The business of business is improving the state of the world.” With these words, Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff captures a growing sentiment among CEOs who believe that their responsibilities extend beyond profit margins. Whether championing for climate action, defending LGBTQ+ rights, or addressing immigration policies, CEOs worldwide are increasingly speaking out on pressing sociopolitical issues.

The racial justice protests that started in the U.S. in 2020, for instance, quickly spread globally, marking a turning point and pushing many executives who had previously

stayed silent to take a public stance. This trend has only intensified, with corporate leaders across the globe now feeling the pressure to address sociopolitical issues. For instance, the recent escalation of the Israel-Hamas conflict has led business leaders like Sundar Pichai (Google) and Jamie Dimon (JPMorgan Chase) to release public statements. This highlights the growing pressure on companies to address global crises. In Germany, CEOs such as Roland Busch (Siemens) and Timotheus Höttges (Telekom) are voicing concerns over the rise of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party and its potential impact on political stability. This rise in CEOs making public statements sparked the interest for this doctoral research, which examines and analyzes the communication strategies behind these actions.

BELOW THE SURFACE: SCHOLARLY INSIGHTS INTO SOCIOPOLITICAL CEO COMMUNICATION

Scholarly research has explored sociopolitical CEO stances from many perspectives, including business, management, law, marketing, and public relations. Researchers have also studied the role of the brand and corporate organization in the context of sociopolitical issues, not just the CEO (see e.g., Moorman, 2020).

With this diverse research, various terms like “CEO activism,” “corporate social advocacy,” or “sociopolitical involvement” – to name just a few – have emerged. Although each term may have subtle differences in meaning, they all allude to CEOs publicly taking a stance on a sociopolitical issue in response to an external event, usually unrelated to their company’s core business (see definition below).

A sociopolitical positioning is ...

- 1 a public communication measure through which a company/its official representative (CEO)
- 2 personally
- 3 takes a clear position
- 4 on a sociopolitical issue.
- 5 The positioning is a reaction to a social event that was not initiated by the company itself or the official representative personally.
- 6 The topics and contents of the communicated messages do not have an immanent intrinsic connection to the core business of the company, although a perceived fit between the actual issue theme and the respective brand may well exist.

(Fröhlich & Knobloch, 2021, p. 2)

While the debate over definitions continues, the real battleground, however, lies in understanding the **risks and rewards of sociopolitical communication**. On the one hand, a sociopolitical stance can boost purchase intentions, sway public opinion, enhance authenticity, and portray the company as a compassionate employer. On the other hand, sociopolitical messages can disrupt business operations, tarnish reputations, demoralize employees, and trigger customer boycotts or investor withdrawals (see overview of selected empirical studies in Lim & Young, 2021). Worse yet, sociopolitical statements may inadvertently reinforce existing inequalities (Ashby-King, 2023).

That said, another question persists about the **motives** behind these stances. While CEOs may generally have various reasons for stepping away from corporate neutrality, some critics argue that, ultimately, sociopolitical statements amount to little more than low-effort, cost-free communication tactics (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021).

To clarify these complex concerns, it’s essential to seek insights from those with expertise in the field: **communications practitioners**. They play a crucial role in developing and executing strategies for CEOs (Zerfaß et al., 2016). The USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations (2022) observed that communication practitioners are increasingly involved in sociopolitical issues. However, many lack guidance on how to handle these critical issues. Against this background, the question remains, however, whether a CEO’s stance on sociopolitical issues comes from strategic, planned communication efforts or if it emerges spontaneously from the CEO (Dodd & Supa, 2014).

To fill in this gap, this research study looked at how communication practitioners view their own contributions in shaping their CEOs’ sociopolitical communication, particularly regarding issues that aren’t linked to the organization’s core business. These issues carry the potential to alienate stakeholders and require careful management to align with both corporate and personal values.



THE MEDIATOR

Mediators often deal with CEOs who act unpredictably and independently, making spontaneous decisions to take a stand, often sparked by public debates or social media. These “first-mover” CEOs (Hambrick & Wowak, 2021) are guided by strong personal beliefs and are usually the first to speak out on issues. Efforts to discourage them are often unsuccessful as their convictions push them forward. They might engage directly with the media, write their own statements and sometimes skip their communication teams. As one interviewee recalled:

»Most of the time, he did not consult us. We would be sitting there, thinking that the world is fine and easy, and suddenly we’d find a tweet from the CEO, and all the journalists would call the company and ask what is going on.«

Communication business partner

Given the CEO’s highly individual and often spontaneous approach to sociopolitical engagement, it’s understandable that communication strategies are more challenging to define and formalize. Mediators must be quick and adaptable, ready to seize opportunities and address issues on the fly rather than relying on thorough pre-planning. They need to be candid, not just agreeing with the CEO but providing honest feedback. When CEOs become too rigid in their views, real-time analytics can help bridge the gap by offering evidence on how to make their activism more effective. Essentially, the mediator’s role focuses on bridging the gap between the CEO and stakeholders by fostering open dialogue, helping the CEO clearly articulate their positions, and preventing misunderstandings. This includes facilitating discussions, addressing public feedback (even hate messages), conducting employee surveys, and organizing feedback sessions.



THE CIRCUMSPECT

For circumspects, both communication practitioners and CEOs approach taking a stance cautiously. While sociopolitical issues matter, CEOs are advised to prioritize their role as business leaders rather than overextend into these areas. As one interviewee put it:

»We’re not here to be advocates, we’re not here to virtue signal. We’re here to focus on the business.«

Senior manager executive communication

For the most part, statements on sociopolitical issues are released when customer, employee, media, or other stakeholder pressure compels it. Simply put, the focus is on the CEO declaring the company’s position rather than actively driving the conversation.

In this sense, circumspects manage both shareholder and stakeholder interests by implementing a clear framework to guide CEOs on when and how to express their views strategically. This framework encourages CEOs to focus on issues where their company can genuinely contribute and avoid empty gestures. Decision-making often follows a flat hierarchy, with the CEO and communication practitioner regularly consulting each other.

While the CEO has the final say, they rely heavily on the practitioner’s counsel. In sum, the circumspect role is vital in providing strategic advice, assessing risks and benefits, and aligning the company’s interests with sociopolitical issues.



THE TANDEM

In the tandem type, both the communication practitioner and CEO are open to collaboratively exploring sociopolitical issues. This approach is driven by the shift from shareholder to stakeholder capitalism, the need to embrace ESG principles, and the importance of engaging with political stakeholders, NGOs, and the public. Together, they proactively select topics that align with the company's values. Sociopolitical positioning is integrated into the corporate communication strategy, using a framework to guide the topics the CEO addresses and which are delegated to other executives more closely connected to the issue.

Tandem communication practitioners maintain regular, direct contact with their CEO. They play a key role in shaping coherent, value-aligned public messaging. Additionally, they prioritize collaboration with other departments to ensure a global perspective and tailor strategies accordingly. For example, a German interviewee consulted the U.S. team before addressing an issue relevant to the U.S. context.

Tandem practitioners carefully consider the cultural context, political climate, industry specifics, and timing. They avoid impulsive reactions to social momentum, focusing on the long-term impact of sociopolitical statements. They believe a CEO's stance should be both genuinely committed to the issue and aligned with the company's goals. This approach combines personal engagement with strategic planning. Or, as one interviewee put it:

»It's always served two ends. We knew we were doing this because it paid into our business goals and because it was also a good match for him as a person.«

Strategic communication manager



THE VALUE CHAMPION

For the value champion, a CEO's sociopolitical stance is not just about taking a position – it's about fearlessly broadcasting the company's core values, especially in moments where those values are violated. Potential stakeholder disagreement is not only tolerated, but even embraced as a tool to reinforce what the company stands for. Rather than playing it safe with universally accepted causes, value champions, guided by organizational epideictic principles (Bigam Stahley & Boyd, 2006), can even dive headfirst into the most contentious, polarizing issues. As one practitioner bluntly put it:

»Yesterday we had a diversity day, and the CEO posted about it on LinkedIn. Once a year – yeah. It's the most boring thing to me now. I mean, how am I supposed to be against it?«

Communication practitioner

This sentiment echoes across the value champion's approach: One practitioner highlighted that the George Floyd incident and the Black Lives Matter movement were catalysts that compelled their company to publicly declare its values. And another described pushing their CEO to speak out after right-wing and anti-migration protests. In these cases, action wasn't driven by a carefully crafted communication plan but by an undeniable sense of urgency when core values are at stake.

Building on this conviction, value champions engage in collaborative discussions with their CEOs, ensuring that any public statements are fully supported by their communication teams. Often, it can be the communication practitioners themselves who lead the push for the CEO's sociopolitical positioning. However, they don't work in isolation. While they may help craft messages or ghost-write, they frequently collaborate with diversity officers, HR, and legal experts to ensure the CEO's messages are clear, aligned with company values, and are legally sound.

That said, value champions stress that meaningful societal impact requires ongoing action, not just statements. This involves working with the media, board members, and employees to ensure the CEO's actions remain consistent with core values and long-term goals. Through this continuous effort, value champions become advocates themselves, promoting the cause, motivating others, and finding a strong sense of purpose in their roles. In one case, this engagement even expanded throughout the organization, evolving into a comprehensive initiative that includes community and employee participation in decision-making.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATORS

When it comes to sociopolitical positioning, there's no one-size-fits-all approach. The results show that managing a CEO's stance on these issues requires more than just effective messaging. It involves communication practitioners to be equipped with a variety of skills to strategize, advise, and mediate between the CEO and multiple stakeholders.

To effectively plan a CEO's sociopolitical positioning, there are some points worth considering **during the strategy process**:

- **Strategic thinking** is essential, as practitioners must anticipate how sociopolitical statements will be received and how they align with the company's broader goals. This involves understanding the CEO's values, the company's mission, and the sociopolitical landscape. In the interviews, participants emphasized the importance of providing a "big picture" perspective to CEOs, advising them on the long-term impact of their statements. This goes beyond mere messaging and requires practitioners to develop comprehensive communication strategies that align with both corporate goals and public expectations.
- Moreover, **crisis management skills** are critical. Sociopolitical statements often provoke strong reactions, requiring practitioners to be prepared for backlash, including negative media coverage or even public criticism. Interviewees highlighted the impor-

tance of having a crisis response plan in place before making any statement, ensuring that they can manage the fallout quickly and effectively. This includes monitoring public sentiment, collaborating with legal teams, and coordinating responses with media outlets.

- Equally important is **stakeholder alignment**, ensuring that the CEO's stance resonates across various internal and external stakeholders. Practitioners must navigate different perspectives, from employees and customers to investors and the broader public. As one interviewee noted, working closely with departments such as HR, legal, and diversity teams is vital to maintaining consistency in communications and ensuring the message aligns with the company's values.
- Furthermore, **cultural awareness and sensitivity** are indispensable, especially for global organizations. Understanding the nuances of different regional sociopolitical climates helps practitioners avoid statements that may be perceived as insensitive or inappropriate.
- **Adaptability and quick decision-making** are also crucial in managing sociopolitical communication. In today's fast-paced media environment, sociopolitical issues can escalate quickly, demanding swift and decisive action. Practitioners need to strike a balance between immediate responsiveness and the long-term strategic planning.

To manage this complexity in practice, there are certain tips to consider when it comes to the moment of action:

- 1 **Choose communication formats that allow control and depth:** Communication practitioners could choose formats that provide more control over the message, such as long-form articles, (employee) letters or interviews, rather than brief social media posts. For instance, articles offer the opportunity to elaborate on complex sociopolitical stances, provide context, and ensure the messaging aligns with corporate values. Interviewees stressed that these formats allow for a more nuanced and well-rounded portrayal of the CEO's position, minimizing the risk of misinterpretation.

- 2 **Delegation is a smart move:** Not every issue requires the CEO's personal input. Sometimes, delegating certain sociopolitical topics to other executives or subject-matter experts within the company can be more effective. Practitioners should assess when it's appropriate for the CEO to speak versus when others in the organization are better suited to address specific issues. This delegation strategy ensures that the CEO remains authentic and focused on issues that directly align with their personal and corporate values.
- 3 **Visuals matter:** Visual communication, such as images, videos, or infographics, often resonates more deeply than words alone. As the saying goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words." Visual content helps simplify complex issues, convey emotions, and make the CEO's stance more relatable to a broader audience. However, it's also important to exercise caution in choosing visuals. Images should reflect the company's values and diversity, ensuring that they are inclusive and representative of all stakeholders.
- 4 **Prioritize the topic, not the channel:** The nature of the issue should always dictate the communication strategy, not the other way around. Before deciding on a platform or communication channel, practitioners should consider the sensitivity, complexity, and cultural relevance of the topic. This ensures that the message is delivered in the most appropriate format, whether that is through a press release, social media, or internal communication. By prioritizing the topic first, communication practitioners can better tailor their strategies to ensure maximum impact.
- 5 **Expect immediate reactions and prepare for backlash:** Practitioners must be prepared for an immediate surge in reactions—both positive and negative—following a CEO's sociopolitical statement. This includes hate messages, public criticism, and potential threats, making it crucial for communication teams to have the time, resources, and crisis management skills to handle the fallout. Several interviewees emphasized the importance of being ready to respond to any backlash in real-time.

CONCLUSION & OUTLOOK

The study looked at how communication practitioners help to shape their CEO's position on sociopolitical issues. However, these insights come with some limitations. The four types identified focus solely on sociopolitical positioning, not general CEO messaging (covering business strategy, corporate success stories, etc.). While useful for identifying patterns and commonalities in complex topics, creating typologies can oversimplify real-world complexities and these idealized types may not fully reflect practice. In reality, these roles likely overlap, and practitioners often navigate blended responsibilities.

The next phase of this dissertation project is set to dive deeper into public preferences regarding CEO communication on sociopolitical issues. This upcoming study will assess how various topics (e.g., environmental, social, political), personalization styles (formal, social, expressive-charismatic), and forms of engagement (e.g., advocacy, activism) influence the effectiveness of CEO statements. By exploring this interplay, this research will aim to offer a fresh perspective on how CEOs can better connect with their audiences and navigate the complexities of public perception. Moreover, understanding why some CEOs choose to stay silent on certain issues could offer valuable insights into the risks and rewards of taking a stand and provide foundations for future studies.

Therefore, the insights from this study are just the beginning. There's a clear need to dig deeper into these communication types, exploring how they play out across different industries and cultures. Surveys could further validate these findings and provide actionable data. Crucially, comparing the perspectives of communication practitioners with those of their CEOs could shed light on the alignment—or the disconnect—in their approaches to sociopolitical communication. While this study intentionally focused on companies that tend to adopt progressive stances on sociopolitical issues, there's a significant opportunity to investigate how more conservative organizations that prioritize tradition and stability navigate these waters.

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RESEARCH PROJECT



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