

THE FAIRNESS FACTOR: EARNING TRUST IN AN AGE OF RAGE

“

To survive, let alone thrive, companies must see everything they do through the lens of fairness. It's not just about changing what you do—it's about changing how you speak, how you act, and how you prove your value. In a world that's always watching, always judging, and quick to cancel, fairness isn't just a strategy. It's the only way forward.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We all feel it: the anger, the frustration, the sense that something fundamental is broken. It's not just in the headlines, it's in every conversation, every social feed, every customer interaction. People aren't just upset; they believe the system is rigged against them. They don't just doubt companies, they expect to be taken advantage of. That's the reality we face today.

This isn't abstract. It's personal. It's urgent. And it's dangerous. The anger we see is rooted in a deep sense of unfairness. It's not just skepticism—it's hostility. And it spreads fast, fueled by social media and a culture that never forgets a misstep. Today, every company starts from a place of distrust. Every interaction is a test.

We've seen the consequences. The tragic murder of Brian Thompson, CEO of United Healthcare, is a stark reminder of just how far this anger can go. Shockingly, more than 40% of Americans think it's sometimes acceptable to take violent action against companies or their leaders when they believe those companies have acted unethically.



For years, companies were told that building trust was about purpose; about doing good and showing impact. The data seemed to support this approach. But what if we were measuring the wrong thing? As companies focused on purpose, what if trust actually declined? As businesses tried to do good, many people felt left out, ignored, or even betrayed. As CEOs took on big issues and took home big paychecks, customers felt more even alienated—and more angry.



Today, more people believe capitalism does harm than good. While distrust in big business isn't new, it's never been this widespread or intense. "Doing good" was supposed to be the answer. But when times got tough—when inflation soared and polarization deepened—the cracks showed.

The promise of “goodness” wasn’t enough.

Now, consumers are mobilized. They have hashtags, viral videos, and a collective memory that never lets go. The outrage is everywhere: junk fees, soaring CEO salaries, layoffs, Wall Street scandals. The culture reflects it, from Oscar-winning films to viral movements. And the anger keeps growing.

“

People want goodness, but what they need—what they demand—is fairness

This is the Age of Rage. And in this environment, "doing good" is no longer good enough. People want goodness, but what they need—what they demand—is **fairness**.

And on fairness, most companies are falling short.

To survive, let alone thrive, companies must see everything they do through the lens of fairness. It's not just about changing what you do; it's about changing how you speak, how you act, and how you prove your value. In a world that's always watching, always judging, and quick to cancel, fairness isn't just a strategy. It's the only way forward.

INTRODUCTION

THE OSTRICH STRATEGY WILL NOT WORK: IF YOU DON'T TELL YOUR STORY SOMEONE ELSE WILL

The old pieties—“We’re making the world a better place”—ring hollow when the lived experience of millions is one of stagnation, exclusion, and indignity.

Right now, too many companies are acting like ostriches: heads down, hoping silence will make the storm pass. In boardrooms across the Fortune 500, we hear from leaders who believe that saying anything in today’s climate—between anti-corporate outrage on one side and political volatility on the other—is simply too risky. And in that silence, others are more than willing to fill the void; telling the story their way, and it’s almost never the story companies would want told.

While companies stay silent, the anger outside only grows louder. The public’s cynicism is not unfounded. The 2020s have been a crucible of broken promises and shattered illusions.

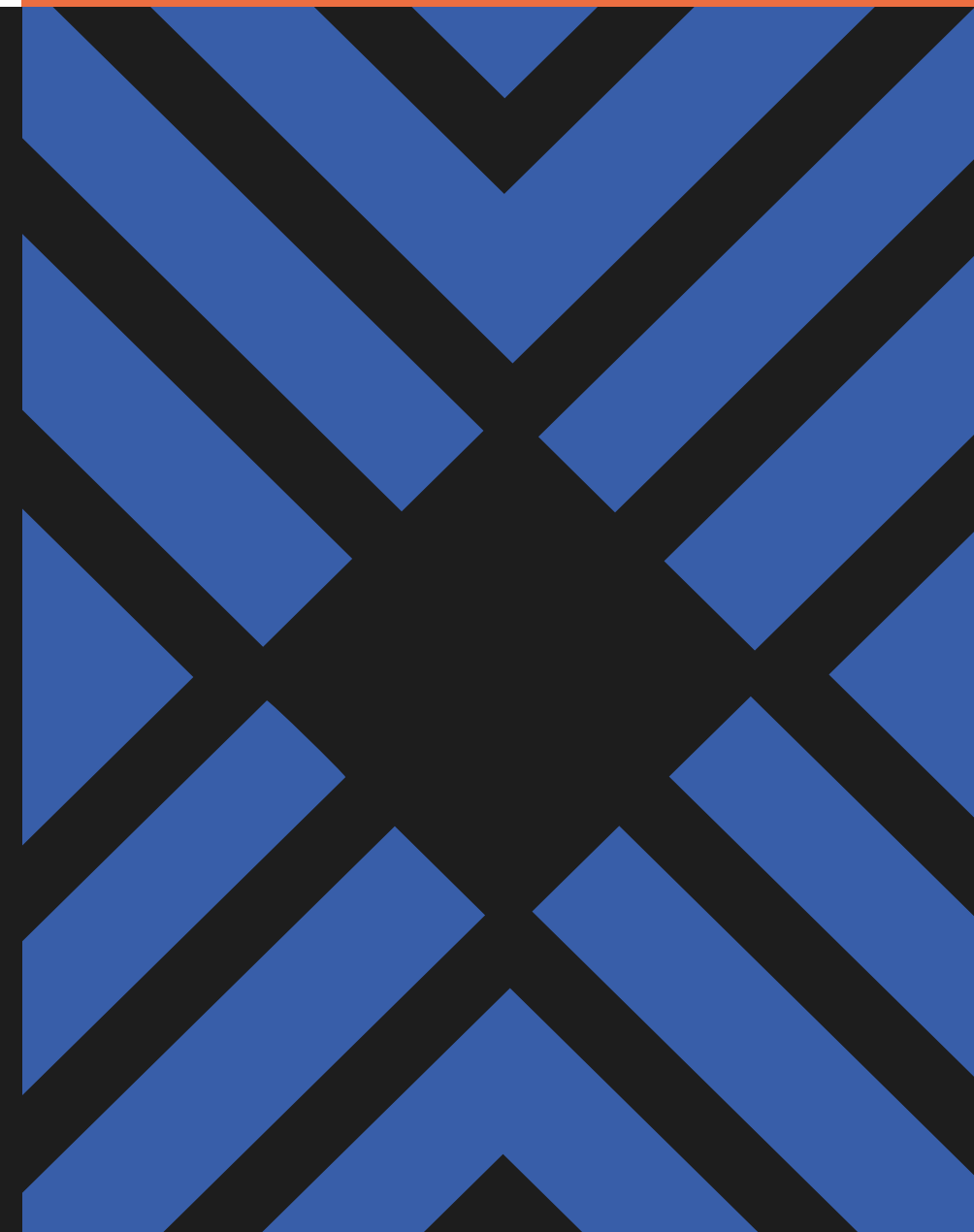
The pandemic exposed the fragility of our systems: the George Floyd protests laid bare the limits of corporate allyship; inflation and economic precarity have made every price hike feel like a personal betrayal. The old pieties—“We’re making the world a better place”—ring hollow when the lived experience of millions is one of stagnation, exclusion, and indignity.



“The decline of stakeholder capitalism and the political resurrection of Donald Trump happened at the same time and for similar reasons: anger at what many Americans perceived as virtue-signaling liberal elitism, despair about the basic cost of living, and distrust of global corporations.” (“How ‘Business for Good’ Went Bad—and what comes next,” James Surowiecki, *Fast Company*, Summer 2025)

That “despair about the basic cost of living” referenced in the *Fast Company* article is not an exaggeration. Many people are in an affordability crisis, struggling to pay their bills and forced to be very careful about where they spend their money. Consequently, they pay much more attention to the companies they spend money with and what they get in return. And as *Fast Company* notes, “it’s not that values are irrelevant to consumers, but price and quality are always going to matter more when people go shopping, and it was always a pipe dream to think otherwise.” (“How ‘Business for Good’ Went Bad—and what comes next,” James Surowiecki, *Fast Company*, Summer 2025)

In this climate, the language of virtue is not just ineffective, it’s inflammatory. The time for telling people what’s good for them is over. The time for listening, for demonstrating respect, and for delivering tangible fairness is here.



THE RISE AND ANATOMY OF CONSUMER RAGE

We are living through a moment of profound disillusionment. The American consumer—once the engine of optimism and aspiration—now seethes with a sense of betrayal that is both personal and systemic.



This is not just a passing mood; it is a structural shift, as seismic as the New Deal or the social upheavals of the 1960s.



Promises Broken:

The proliferation of “junk fees” and hidden charges has become a symbol of corporate duplicity. The White House’s recent crackdown on these practices is a direct response to a groundswell of consumer outrage.

- **53%** of consumers think companies never, rarely, or only sometimes keep their promises



Executive Excess:

The spectacle of CEO pay packages ballooning while layoffs dominate the headlines is not lost on the public. The Wall Street Journal’s exposés on executive compensation have become a recurring motif in the narrative of corporate greed.

- **78%** of consumers think CEOs and other executives get to play by a different set of rules than the rest of us
- **82%** think business executives need to be held more accountable for the bad actions of their companies
- **51%** selected “they profit off my back” among the top things that bother them most about the behavior of companies today



Anger at the System:

71% of Americans say “in my country, the rich keep getting richer, while average people get screwed.” #OutOfTouch trends as a digital referendum on the political class.

- **73%** of Americans say “business executives in my country are out of touch with people like me
- **76%** of Americans believe politicians are out of touch



Capitalism Under Fire:

The GameStop/Reddit “stonks” saga was not just a financial anomaly, it was a populist insurrection, a digital Boston Tea Party for the 21st century.

- Nearly half (**49%**) of consumers believe the capitalist system is rigged
- **42%** think big businesses make life worse

This is not just about economics; it is about dignity. When Parasite won Best Picture in 2020, it was not merely a cinematic triumph—it was a cultural verdict on inequality, a global acknowledgment that the system is not just broken, but rigged.

THE THREE SEISMIC SHIFTS IN CONSUMER EXPECTATIONS (AND HOW TO SURVIVE THEM)

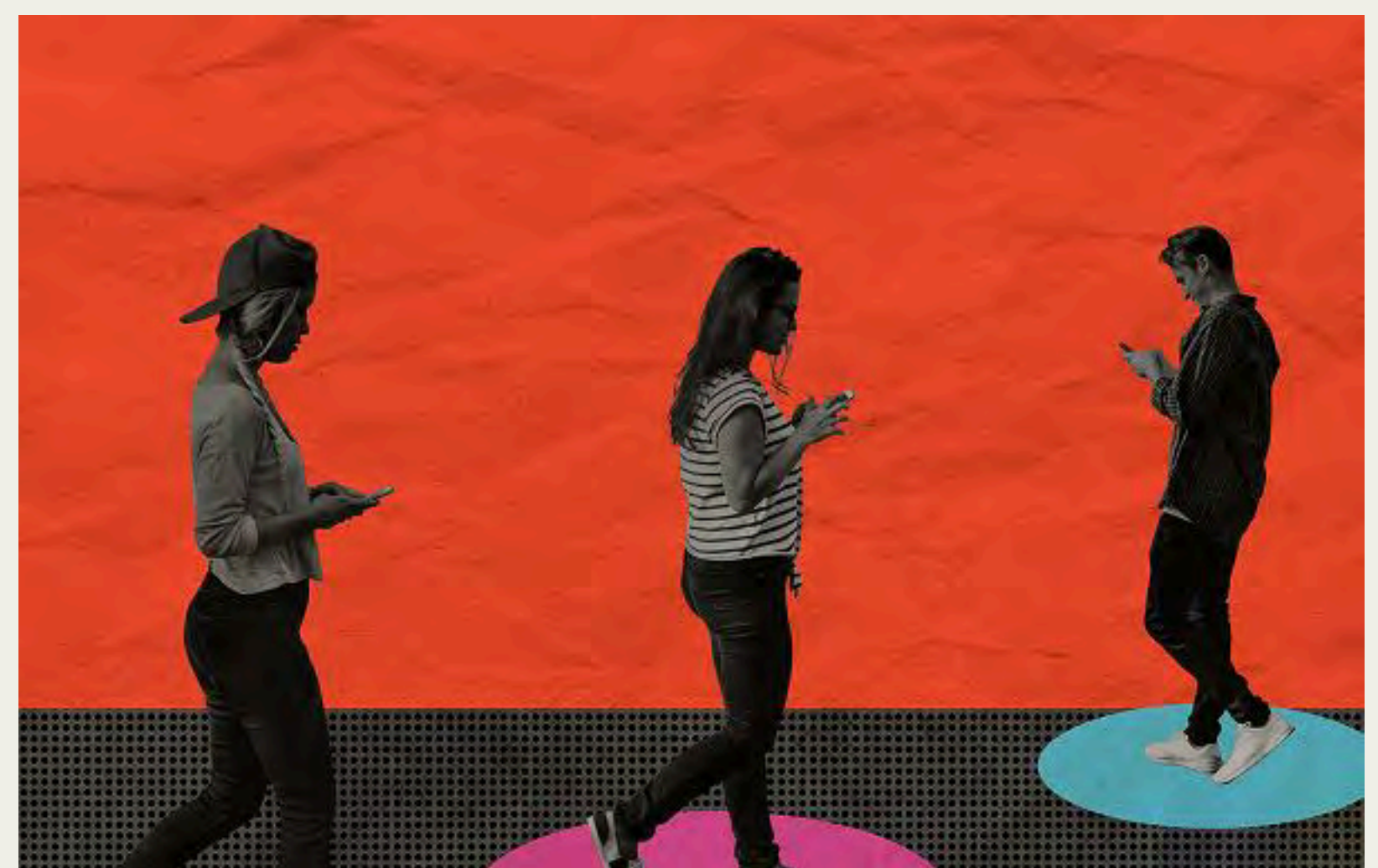
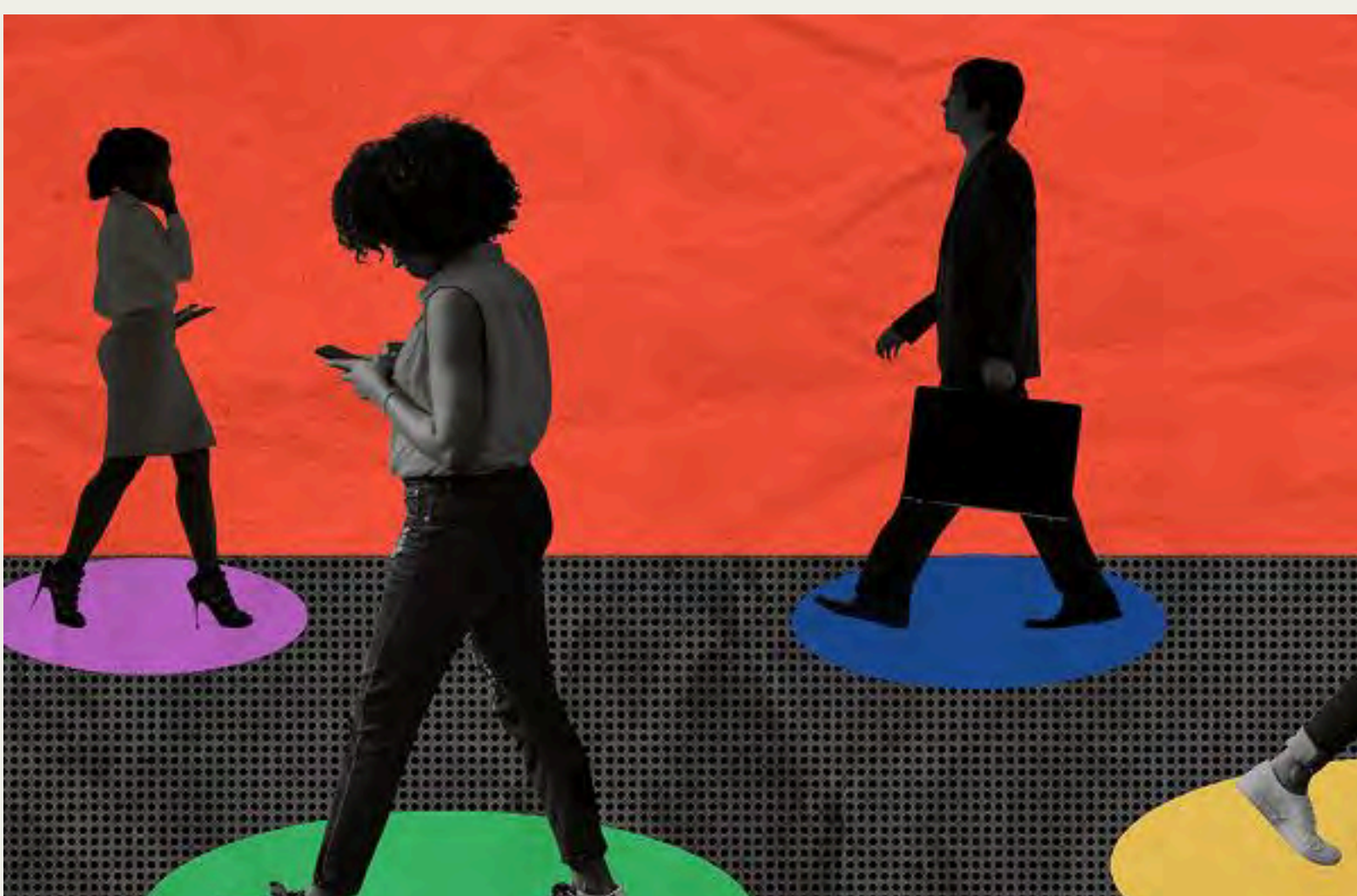
Shift #1:

Building Trust → Combatting Distrust

In the world of crisis response, rebuilding typically starts after the scandal has finished. This is much easier to handle than a crisis that never stops. Think Wells Fargo from 2016-2020 or Boeing over the past several years. A constant drip of bad news makes it impossible to make progress with good news. While the minor frustrations, annoyances, and instances of perceived unfairness today may not make the news, they have a similar cumulative effect. If your consumer enters every engagement with you assuming they are going to be taken advantage of, then you need to meet them where they are.

61%

of consumers believe "most big companies purposely look for ways to take advantage of their customers"



57%

of consumers say they never, rarely, or only sometimes trust companies to do the right thing

Shift #2:

“You Don’t Care” → “It’s Unfair”

For decades, the dominant negative narrative about company behavior was that “companies don’t care.” But just as the political debate has shifted to a battle over fairness, so too has the criticism of company behavior. As we have seen in politics, people react to perceived unfairness in much more visceral and negative ways than uncaring behavior. The outrage over hidden fees, discriminatory practices, and exploitative pricing is not just about money; it is about justice.

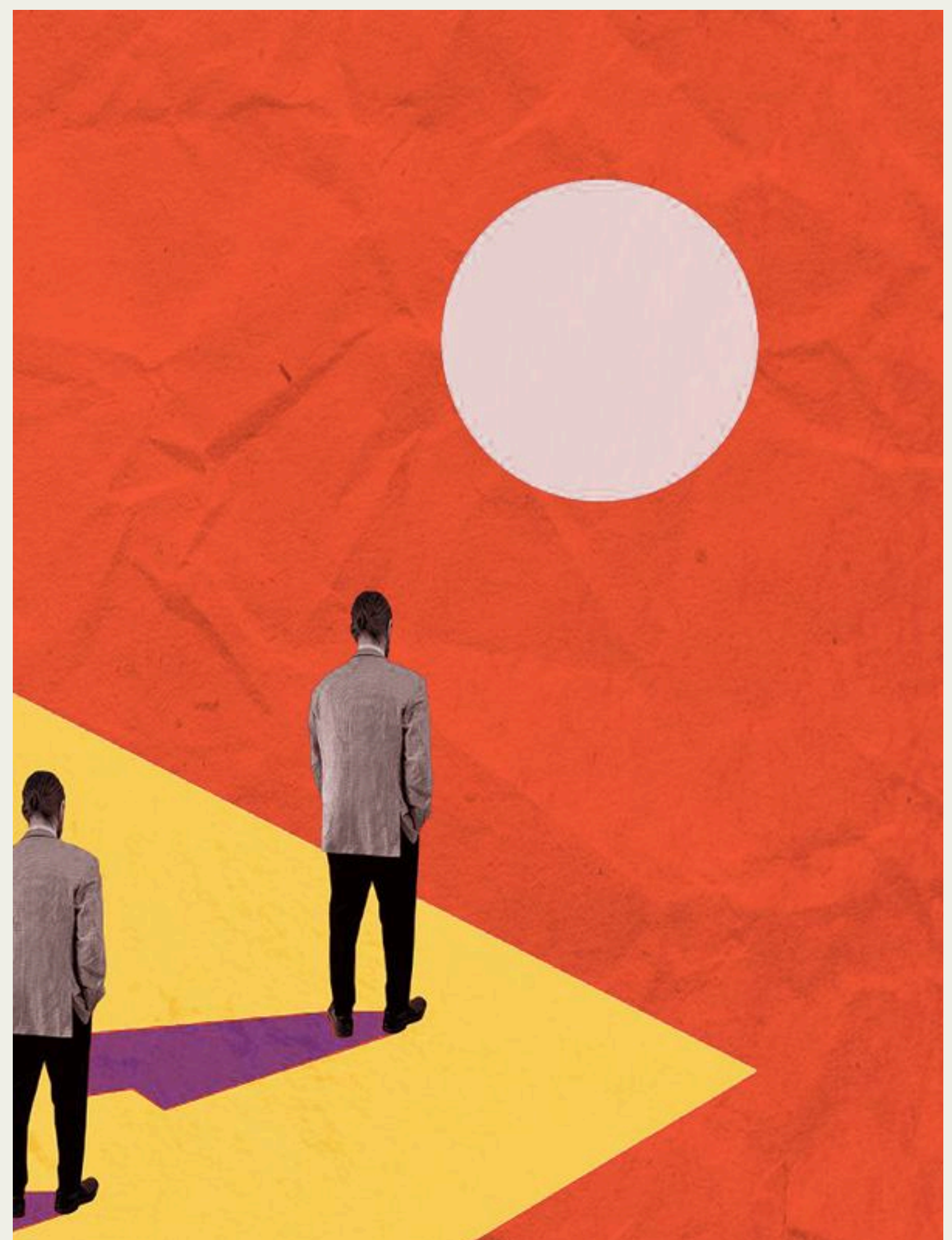


71%

of consumers expect companies to never, rarely, or only sometimes treat customers fairly

80%

of consumers are angered by hidden fees—more than any other issue, including performative social activism. The viral TikToks exposing “junk fees” are the modern equivalent of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*—a grassroots exposé that shames the powerful into action.



Shift #3:

Goodness → Fairness

The shift in consumers’ criticism is mirrored by a shift in their expectations as well. All else being equal, many consumers *want* companies to do good in the world. But all else is not equal. Polarization means there is wide disagreement about what it means to “do good.” Inflation and a more challenging economy mean that consumers are focused more on needs than wants. And unequivocally:

54%

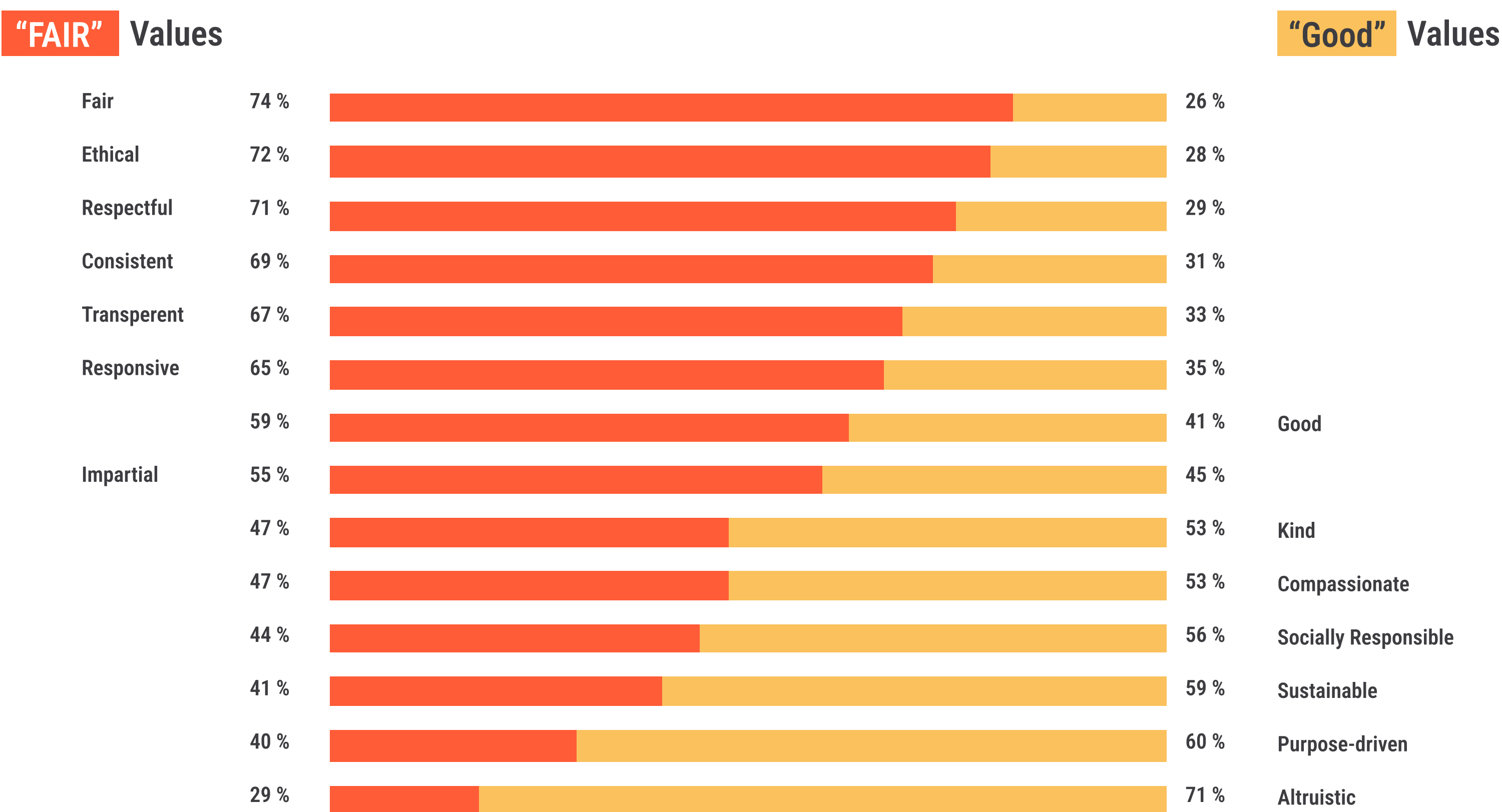
of consumers say "too many companies are trying to force their values down my throat"

60%

of consumers say "companies should focus more on serving customers and less on serving society"

When asked to classify 12 corporate values as wants or needs, six of the top seven needs were related to fairness, while the wants were most commonly related to goodness.

When asked which values matter most, preferences are clear



News Headline: “Brands Caught in the Crossfire: Why Fairness Is the Only Safe Harbor” (The Atlantic, 2024)

THE EVOLUTION OF CORPORATE MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION



The language of fairness
is not just a trend.

The history of corporate messaging is a history of adaptation. From the hard sell of the Mad Men era to the emotional branding of the 1980s, from the rise of corporate social responsibility in the 2000s to the purpose-driven campaigns of the 2010s, each era has reflected the anxieties and aspirations of its time.

Today, we stand at another inflection point. The language of fairness is not just a trend—it is an imperative. The companies that will endure are those that make fairness their organizing principle, not just a marketing slogan.

The Evolution of Corporate Marketing



Marketing Products:

Focused on features and benefits. (Think: "New! Improved! Now with 20% more!")



Marketing Companies:

Emphasized corporate values and purpose. (See: Patagonia's "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign.)



Marketing Fairness:

Demonstrating direct benefit and fairness to the individual customer. (The new gold standard.)



Marketing Brands:

Built emotional connections and loyalty. (Remember: "I'm Lovin' It"?)



Marketing Social Good:

Highlighted contributions to society and the planet. (Think: Ben & Jerry's activism.)

Historical Reference: Just as Henry Ford's \$5 workday redefined labor relations in the early 20th century, today's leaders must redefine the social contract for the 21st.

SIX STEPS YOU CAN TAKE RIGHT NOW (BEFORE YOUR BRAND GETS BLOWBACK)

1

Shift from the Language of Goodness to the Language of Fairness:

"We treat you fairly" is more powerful than "We care about you." The former is a promise; the latter is a platitude.



Instead of "We'll take care of you":
"We'll treat you like you would treat yourself."

Discover has run commercial ads and uses language on their website and in customer communications centered on the idea "Like You'd Treat You"—implying they handle customer interactions with the same care and respect as if the customer were dealing with themselves.



Instead of "Giving away medicine to those in need":
"Ensuring low-cost access to medicines for everyone."

Through the Accord for a Healthier World, **Pfizer** aims to provide it's portfolio of nearly 500 products on a not-for-profit basis in 45 low- and lower-middle-income countries. They also offer patient assistance programs to help eligible patients afford their medications.

2

Elevate Customers and Employees Over Abstract Stakeholders:

The public is unmoved by vague commitments to "community." They want to see concrete benefits for real people—customers and employees first.



Instead of "diversity" in hiring:
"Best Talent from Anywhere."

IBM's hiring process puts candidates through a series of assessment tests, all of which have been scientifically validated. The tests are tailored to each position and designed to prioritize merit and skill-based hiring. This makes IBM's testing process fair and reduces hiring bias in the recruitment process.



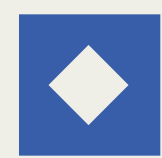
Instead of shutting down employee enthusiasm: Supporting employees and letting the world know you're backing them.

Chick-fil-A told an employee to stop making videos after going viral on TikTok with enthusiastic reviews about the company's menu items. Shake Shack saw a missed opportunity, hired her, and partnered with her on videos featuring their own food items. The videos went viral, sending thousands of her followers away from Chick-fil-A and towards Shake Shack.

3

Demonstrate Fairness for All

Inclusivity is not about identity politics; it is about universal access. The most successful programs are those that benefit everyone, not just the favored few.



Instead of "Remedy inequities for historically underserved": "Equal access regardless of race, income, or zip code."

Levi Strauss & Co.'s partnership with the "Open to All" coalition and campaign reinforces the company's dedication to providing a welcoming and inclusive experience for everyone who interacts with their brand, not a select few.



Instead of new customer discounts: "Everyone gets the best price."

AT&T's "Everyone Gets Our Best Deals" slogan emphasizes that both new and existing customers can take advantage of their best phone deals.

4

Make it about Moments of Trust, not Monuments of Trust:

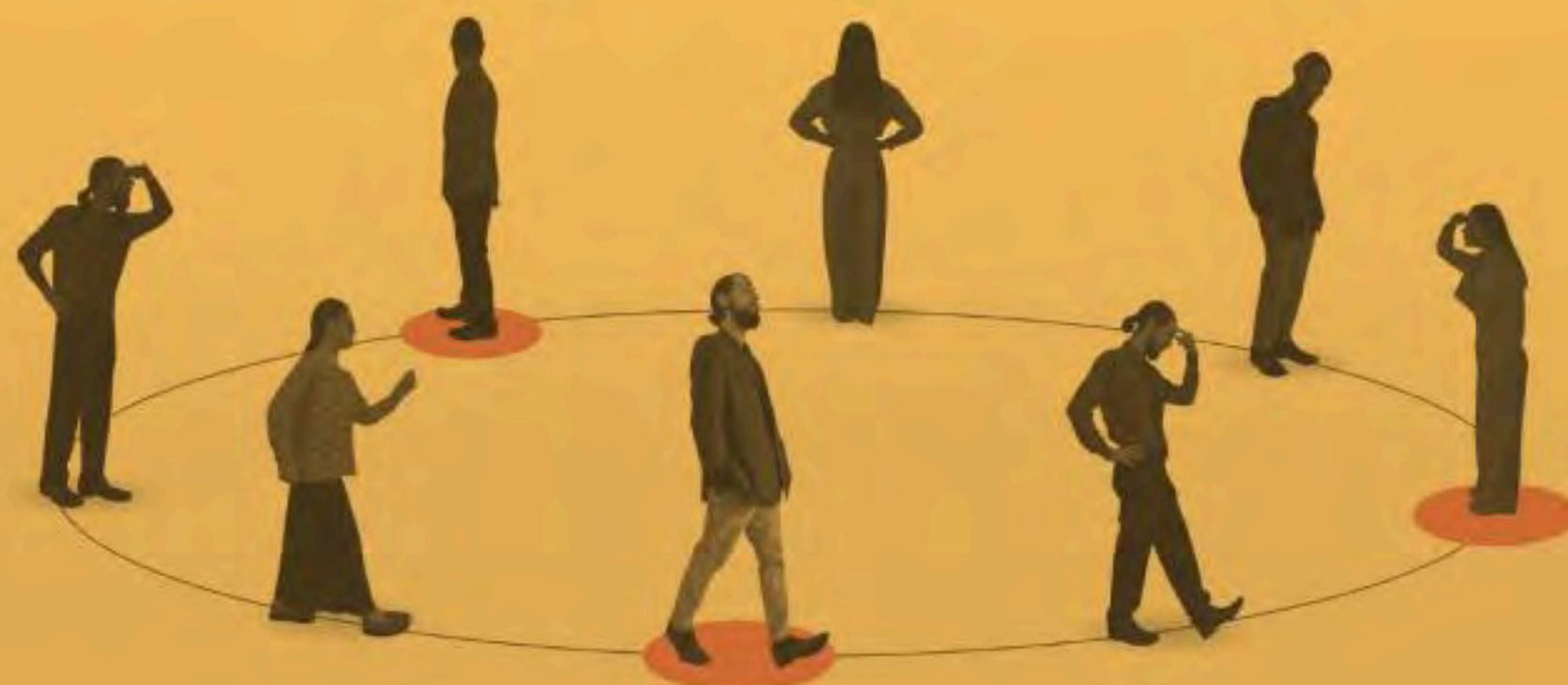
Hidden fees, surprise charges, and fine print are the new frontline of consumer rage. Fix these, or prepare to be shamed on social media. Evaluate every interaction to identify whether it is demonstrating you are treating customers fairly or just fulfilling their negative expectations.



Instead of major trust-building initiatives: "moments of trust."

With **Everlane**'s "Radical Transparency" approach, they openly share the true cost of their products and details about their factories to inform consumers.

Southwest Airlines' "Transfarency" campaign focuses on transparent pricing and no hidden fees, resonating with customers who value honesty in the travel industry.



5

Connect Actions to Customer and Business Benefits:

Every initiative should answer the question: “How does this make life better for our customers?” If the answer is unclear, the initiative is unnecessary.



Instead of “Water Neutral by 2050”: “Protecting local water supplies.”

Keurig has vowed to “provide access to clean water to one million people worldwide”, a goal that might not be entirely within its power to achieve. However, its own brewing system was designed to minimize the use of water and results in little or no waste.

With its “Food with Integrity” initiative, **Chipotle** sources ingredients from farms that prioritize animal welfare and sustainable agriculture. The tangible business benefit? This commitment to quality and transparency attracts health-conscious customers, supports premium pricing, and strengthens brand trust.

6

Confront the Elephant in the Room:

Acknowledge skepticism. Address grievances head-on. The fastest way to build trust is to admit where you have failed—and to show, not just tell, how you will do better.



Instead of ignoring backlash: acknowledging mistakes and apologizing.

In April 2025, **Nike** faced backlash for using the phrase “Never again” on billboards at the London Marathon. The slogan, commonly associated with Holocaust remembrance, was deemed insensitive in this context. Nike acknowledged the oversight and removed the billboards, stating they did not intend to cause offense.

Apple caused a stir on social media when they released a video showing a hydraulic press crushing a collection of creative tools, with everything compressed into a new iPad Pro. The intended message that iPad can do it all was lost among the disturbing images of beloved creative objects being smashed—and the backlash was fast and furious, especially in a time when many are worried about AI technology taking over jobs and replacing human elements like creativity. Apple admitted their mistake, responding: “We missed the mark with this video, and we’re sorry.”


Pop Culture Reference:

This is your *Ted Lasso* moment: radical honesty, relentless optimism, and a commitment to doing right by your team, even when it's hard.

News Headline: *"The End of Corporate Jargon: Why Plain Talk Wins in the Age of Rage"* (Harvard Business Review, 2024)



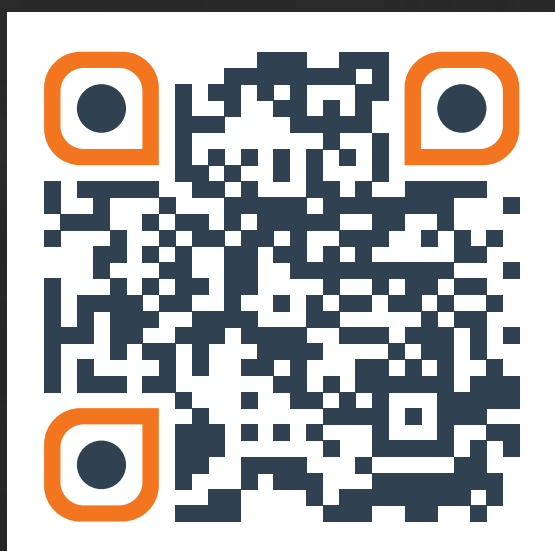
CONCLUSION

THE CHOICE IS **YOURS**

The path forward is not for the faint of heart. It demands humility, courage, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths. The companies that will survive the Age of Rage are those that embrace fairness not as a tactic, but as a creed.

Historical Reference: Just as Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal restored faith in American democracy during its darkest hour, today's leaders have the opportunity—and the obligation—to restore faith in the marketplace. The stakes are nothing less than the legitimacy of capitalism itself.

There is hope. The path forward requires imagination and consistency—meeting people where they actually are, speaking in ways that resonate, engaging with a sincerity that's long overdue, and remaining committed to these practices over time, not just for this moment in time. Remember the hard truth that if you don't tell your story, someone else will—and it won't be the version you want. Right now, you have a rare chance to rewrite your narrative, to quiet the anger and earn something rarer still: trust. In a world starved for authenticity, that's the only currency that matters.



maslansky.com



teamoprg.com