

The Risks of Communicating Your Political Stripes
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It's only July, the party conventions still await and the general election is four months away. Yet the time since the nominees announced their candidacies through the primaries and caucuses until now surpasses multiple election seasons of a century or even a few decades ago. Twenty-four hour coverage of the minutest details of the candidates is partially responsible but I would argue that the tenor of this race is the other driver in its longevity. In my adulthood, I don't remember another race having started, whether officially or unofficially, so far in advance. Maybe I'm just paying more attention this time but I don't think I'm alone in that. Given the current climate in this country people are either poised to sweep in a vote for change or are determined to stay the current course.

The point of this article isn't to discuss the camp in which you reside, try to persuade you to another camp or express my own opinion about the outcome of the election. It is meant to address the familiar adage that many business owners will be thinking about over the next four months - ***never discuss politics in the workplace***. Why then would a freelance business writer disregard that advice by jumping into the political fray to discuss the current election season and its political fallout? The answer is that whether it's done overtly or inadvertently, most of us let our political stripes peak through, especially during a presidential election. Given that the intensity of this election has enticed even the most politically apathetic to speak out, it follows that at some point or another you will make your own opinion known as you communicate with friends and colleagues. In personal relationships, the risk of doing so is minimized by friends being able to respect friends' opinions. In the business environment especially small business, the symbiotic relationship between a company and its customers makes showing your political stripes a little trickier but does that mean it is an absolute taboo? To answer that question, consider some ways in which business owners potentially make their preferences known to others.

Contributing to Candidates

Business owners passionate enough about their choice might opt to make a contribution to a particular candidate or party. First and foremost, potential donors must follow the Federal Election Commission's limits for personal contributions (www.fec.gov/pages/brochures/contriblimits.shtml). These laws include the FEC prohibition on corporations making contributions or business owners making a contribution from a business account. If you choose to make an individual contribution and assume it is confidential, consider that contributions in excess of \$200 are available for public access and some local newspapers even publish articles highlighting area business persons' donations to political parties and specific candidates.

Public Endorsement of Candidates

While not a super delegate or political VIP whose endorsement is made through the press, some business owners might consider championing their candidate in a public format such as displaying a candidate's poster at their place of business, putting a political bumper sticker on their car, blogging about a political issue or even going so far as linking a candidate's website to their own. All of these would be in the public eye and therefore subject to agreement, dissent and discussion by those reading such endorsements, although not necessarily with the initiator because of the very fact that they are so unconcealed. If not handled correctly, it could be interpreted that you are not open to other viewpoints.

Subliminal Messages

Many business owners would adamantly refuse to subject their business to either of those scenarios convinced that it would be inappropriate or harmful to their business relationships. However their views may still end up being expressed in more subtle or even inadvertent ways whether they are aware of it or not. An opinion expressed to an employee might be construed as prerequisite for employment. A random comment about the election made outside the context of your business might find its way to a customer. A grimace at the mention of one candidate's name or veiled reference to another's political future may send a more telling message than you desired or intended.

Staying Quiet or Speaking Up

As a business owner then, is it better to stay politically mute except for your immediate family and trusted friends or is it acceptable to express your political views openly? The answer lies partially in the political atmosphere of your business community. Is it an environment where all views can be openly discussed? Are differing viewpoints encouraged? How closely do your views align with the general consensus? The second piece to the puzzle is the fervor of your own opinions. How willing are you to listen to those with opposing views. If you let your own views be known, it is okay to defend your point but you must also be willing to engage in discussions with those whose views differ from your own. Exhibiting the ability to do that may deepen your business relationships and encourage others to welcome a more open environment for discussion.

Our country was born from the idea that dissent is okay and it in fact fosters an enlightened environment where new ideas and old traditions can be combined to create something better. Many of our founding fathers disagreed with each other on particular issues but were able to form a consensus to move the country forward. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson famously disagreed on the future course of the country after the revolution yet in the end they became good friends. Of course that was politically oriented and the survival of a new nation

was at stake. A fact they were well aware of and motivated by in how they reacted to opposing views.

While not quite as dire as that, business owners certainly consider the survival of their business as one of their most pressing concerns, one they do not risk lightly. Therefore it is wise to consider that adage over the next few months but not necessarily as a directive. Rather as a gentle nudge to tread lightly and consider whether you and your business are better off being forthright with your opinions or staying silent. Verbal communications are as important to your business as written communications and done without forethought can be just as damaging as poorly worded written collateral.

If your choice is to openly communicate your views, just make sure it is clear that they are your own personal views and do not represent your business, your employees or anyone else connected to it. You also want to ensure that those you are talking to, whether it is customers or employees, know that you allow an open dialogue and no one will be shut out because their views differ from yours. If you determine that staying silent is best for your business, then do just that by making a conscious effort to avoid letting any subliminal messages cloud your conversations. With this calculated business decision in hand, it will be your good judgment that directs your reaction to upcoming political events rather than your fervor taking the reins and getting you into trouble you don't need or want.

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