

The background of the entire image is a dark, atmospheric photograph of a boat's deck at night. A vertical mast or pole is visible on the left side. In the upper right, a bright, jagged lightning bolt strikes down from a dark, stormy sky. The water is dark and textured. The overall mood is intense and mysterious.

NSFW

**WTF CAN BRANDS
SAY ANYMORE?**

WE'RE ABOUT TO FIND OUT.

Current Group

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:

In a time when cultural fault lines are sharper than ever, we set out to understand what consumers really want from brands when it comes to controversial topics. Conducted in partnership with KRC Research, our NSFW Pulse Poll surveyed 1,007 U.S. adults to explore what issues people expect brands to engage with, who gets to speak, and what authenticity looks like in 2025.

This guide distills the four most important takeaways from that research—plus actionable implications for communicators, marketers, and brand leaders who want to show up boldly and strategically.



INSIGHT #1: KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

The 'General Population' is a myth—
welcome to the age of Personal Alignment.

The fiction of a one-size-fits-all “general population” is gone. Audiences judge brands through wildly different value lenses shaped by generation, identity, and ideology, and they expect messaging that acknowledges those nuances.

KEY FINDINGS:

- 61% say brands should speak out on issues—but Gen Z clocks in at 81% while Boomers drop to 53%.
- Cultural landmines differ wildly: For instance mental health and sustainability are “safe”; sex, religion, and reproductive rights are “stay away” zones for many.
- Gen Z and Millennials are far more open than Boomers to brands taking bold stances—eight out of 10 Gen Zers (81%) say brands should speak out, even on sensitive issues. But their support comes with nuance, as they welcome conversations on discrimination and consent, yet prefer brands steer clear of topics like sex and relationships.
- Diverse communities consistently want more dialogue on sensitive topics than white audiences—especially when it comes to race, gender, and identity.
 - 86% of Black consumers, 76% of Asian consumers, and 72% of Hispanic consumers say they want brands to engage more on these issues, compared to just 51% of white consumers.
- Political divides run deep: Conservative audiences’ comfort plummets outside a narrow band of “safe” issues; many topics drop below 40% acceptance among Republicans while staying above 60% for Democrats. On discrimination/sexual-harassment & consent, 71% of Democrats want more brand dialogue versus just 36% of Republicans. Both parties agree religion is off the table—an echo of the old “don’t talk religion at work” rule.

IMPLICATIONS FOR BRANDS:

- Before stepping into any topic, map your audience’s ideological profiles and understand their values.
- Replace broad “gen pop” briefs with communities or segments based on values to find where each cohort draws its red line.
- Tailor your tone and creative expression to your audience’s identity—not just demographics.

INSIGHT #2: KNOW WHO YOU ARE AS A BRAND

Authenticity is table stakes—consistency is the new credibility.

Credibility now rests on whether a company's policies, products, and history back up every public word. "Walk the talk" is the universal authenticity filter.

KEY FINDINGS:

- One thing all audiences agree on is what makes brand activism feel real. Across all surveyed, the top three answers were "actions match words," "transparency," and "long-term commitment."
- Perceived pandering is consumers' single strongest boycott trigger, outranking simple disagreement with the stance itself; 45% of Boomers name it as their No. 1 deal-breaker.
- Flip-flopping on a stance buys almost no forgiveness. If a brand takes a stance users dislike, and then later walks that stance back, 33% of users will still boycott that brand.

IMPLICATIONS FOR BRANDS:

- Don't just "take a stand"—take *your* stand, in a way that aligns with who your brand already is.
- Live it internally with employees before taking it external to other stakeholders.
- Anchor every public stance in long-standing brand purpose, policies, or partnerships.
- Prove impact with product-level campaigns—not just comms from corporate.
- Consistency = trust. Do a values audit before every campaign.
- Commit to action beyond the press cycle: Ongoing updates and lived experiences matter.



INSIGHT #3: KNOW WHEN (AND WHEN NOT) TO SPEAK

Actions (and inactions) have consequences.

Consumers welcome brand voices—but only under the right conditions. Permission hinges on topic relevance, audience readiness, and a clear escalation path rather than a dramatic “zero-to-100” leap.



KEY FINDINGS:

- Asked whether brands should speak about issues, 61% say yes—but they split into two almost-equal camps:
 - 29% want bold stances even if unrelated to the category.
 - 32% are fine with dialogue only when the topic is pertinent to the brand.
- **Act and alienate?** 41% of consumers say they will boycott a brand that takes a stance they dislike; another 42% will keep buying but watch closely (and 24% will reach out for answers).
- **Public critique is now social currency.** Public critique should be expected, not a surprise. 20% said they will air their grievances publicly on social media.



IMPLICATIONS FOR BRANDS:

- Silence isn't neutral. For multicultural and values-driven audiences, it signals complacency and risks loyalty. Every decision to speak up, stay quiet, or shift course should be intentional, strategic, and grounded in audience expectations.
- Start by building a “stance staircase.” Begin with topics that have a natural tie to your business, employees, or community. Then, as you gain clarity and trust, consider moving into more complex or adjacent issues.
- Stress-test each step with stakeholder data: Know where your audiences sit on the spectrum and communicate progress transparently.
- Use scenario mapping to decide if, when, and how you progress to hotter terrain—and rehearse exit plans for each step.
- Build “readiness buffers”: scenario plans, cross-functional sign-offs, and proof-point content that shows you're acting, not reacting.
- If you opt in, own it fully. Be prepared to clarify and defend as needed.
- Every choice—including doing nothing—sends a signal. Treat the decision to act, stay quiet, or change course as strategic moves with measurable upside and downside, and plan communications, proof-points, and mitigation tactics accordingly.
- Where relevance is weak, silence can be strategic; focus resources on arenas where your brand has earned permission.

INSIGHT #4: KNOW HOW TO BUILD EQUITY AUTHENTICALLY

Long-term brand equity is built through sustained, community-tied action—not sporadic hot takes.

Align your internal values with your external messaging—authenticity starts from within.



KEY FINDINGS:

- “Walking the talk” is cited by 62% of college grads and 47% of Gen Z as the top authenticity signal—evidence that concrete deeds outperform campaigns alone.
- When a brand’s stance clashes with personal views, consumers fragment: 41% boycott, 42% keep buying but watch closely, and 24% reach out to the brand directly.
- 30% say if a brand takes an action they don’t align with, they’ll continue to buy but will shop around, signaling a probation period rather than instant cancellation.



IMPLICATIONS FOR BRANDS:

- Embed your values in business operations: products, partners, philanthropy.
- Open feedback loops and show you’re listening.
- Pay close attention to probation signals.
- Equip spokespeople with layered messaging, from soft context to hard stance.
- Treat social discourse as strategy—engagement, not avoidance, is the goal.

A hand holding an open vintage brass compass. The compass face is ornate, featuring a fleur-de-lis design in the center and a scale around the perimeter. The needle points towards the top of the frame. The background is a blurred, dark, textured surface.

BOTTOM LINE:

Consumers want brand boldness—but they want it on their terms. In 2025, the most human brands will be those that show up with clarity, conviction, and cultural fluency. Let this guide be your compass as you navigate what's truly “Not Safe For Work,” and what's too important to ignore. Lead with substance, listen with humility, and treat every conversation as a chance to build—not just broadcast—your brand's values.

HOW CAN WE HELP?

At Current Group, we specialize in earned-first storytelling that helps brands lead with meaning when it matters most.

In today's climate, where the line between bold and risky is constantly shifting, our work is rooted in helping brands show up authentically, navigate cultural flashpoints, and make smarter, insight-driven decisions.

VISIT [WEARECURRENTGROUP.COM](https://www.wearecurrentgroup.com)

CONTACT US AT HELLO@WEARECURRENTGROUP.COM