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How businesses should conduct themselves socially in politically polarized times

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Growing at a furious pace, political polarization in America is creating a seemingly unbridgeable rift. Since President Trump's election, the majority of likely voters believe America is more divided, and 31 percent think we may

experience a civil war in the next five years, according to a recent Rasmussen Reports.

Given the highly charged political climate evident in the recent elections, when sensitive issues come up in social or business situations, middle-market business owners may want to tread thoughtfully — or risk losing business and friends, as well as their reputation.

There are several approaches a business can adopt to navigate political landmines, but the first step is for companies to make a conscious, deliberate decision on how to proceed.

One option is to avoid politics altogether. If, at a gathering, a politically charged issue like immigration, gun control, or healthcare comes up, simply don't go there. Diplomatically deflect and redirect to common ground that everybody can agree on, such as the value of good schools.

However, avoiding politics also means carefully monitoring social media content. Google, Facebook and LinkedIn are usually the first stops for people you meet, and those platforms should reflect neutrality. As the saying goes, "social media is like a glass house and when you live in a glass house you must dress the part." With profiles subject to ongoing scrutiny, people may not want to do business with you based on a post charged with political innuendo. Much care should be taken to filter out politics from online discourse if neutrality is what you have chosen.

Another alternative is taking a stance. For example, you may be willing to risk the loss of both customers and employees who are not like-minded. Not for the faint-hearted, this choice requires the courage to stick to your convictions, like the baker who refused to bake a cake for a gay couple and whose decision was upheld by the Supreme Court; or like Nike taking on the controversial Colin Kaepernick, the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback who kneeled in protest, for its commemorative 30-year "Just Do It" campaign.

As you decide if taking a stance is the right option for your business, consider the ramifications with those whose views are diametrically opposed to yours. For many, principles and doing what they feel is the right thing may be more important than maintaining or expanding a client base. If that's the case, you

may be surprised to find you might actually gain new business from people who share your beliefs.

A word of caution: the last approach should never be an excuse for undermining people with viewpoints that differ from yours. Be inclusive. Agree to disagree in a way that is civilized, thoughtful, and respectful of the rights and beliefs of others. Failure to do so not only runs counter to our democratic principles but can hurt you and your business's image — even among clients who share your political inclination.

Regardless of the approach you adopt, establishing clear workplace policies will help guide employees with their own political agendas in the office or at networking or other business events.

Speaking with your company's lawyers to get a comprehensive picture of federal and state laws governing what employers can do in relation to their employees is also important. As a general rule, businesses may have policies in place prohibiting all forms of solicitation, including political campaigning in the workplace. Speak to your employees about social media: help them understand the potential implications, both for your company, and for them as professionals. While you can't necessarily dictate the content they post personally, you can develop clear rules regarding how social media should be used on the job.

In this era of unprecedented political divisiveness, it is essential for business owners to thoughtfully choose how they proceed. When confronted with emotionally-charged subjects, they must be prepared. Although employees cannot and should not be forced to adopt your political views, establishing pertinent guidelines for workplace and company-related social events can minimize sending conflicting signals.

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