

Agency for Change Podcast: Meike Eilert, Corporate Social Responsibility and Activism Expert

Announcer:

Welcome to Agency for Change, the podcast that brings you the stories of people creating positive change in the world. We explore what inspires these changemakers, the work they're doing and how they share their message. Each of us can play a part in change, and these are the people who show us how.

Lyn Wineman:

Hello, changemakers. This is Lyn Wineman, president of KidGlov. Welcome to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. Now many of you know this podcast was launched in 2020 in the midst of a global pandemic, during a period of economic distress and a time of social unrest. Sounds like fun, right? While it was a tough year, some good things did happen. One was an awakening of major brands and companies who are increasingly taking a public stance on social issues.

Lyn Wineman:

Today's guest, Meike Eilert, is a corporate social responsibility and activism expert. She spent the last decade doing scientific research on this topic, and her work has been published in the *Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Journal of Marketing and Public Policy*, and *Journal of Business Ethics*. That's just about all the journals, I think. Welcome, Meike. I can't wait to dive into this topic today.

Meike Eilert:

Thanks, Lyn, for having me. I'm very excited to be on the podcast.

Lyn Wineman:

Absolutely! This is going to be a really interesting conversation. You and I met virtually on LinkedIn, and I was instantly captivated by your work. I just want to start by asking in your opinion, what is it about this point in time that is causing so many major brands and companies to take a stand on social issues?

Meike Eilert:

That's a really good question. Actually, we began seeing this shift a couple years before the pandemic. It really started with the previous presidential election. Since then, if you recall, we had the Parkland shooting, which was a high-profile incident, and we also had youth activists like Greta Thunberg being very active on sustainability and climate change. Companies have been increasingly taking stances on some of these issues, but it was in the past year that we saw this change from companies being a little bit more reactive when it came to the activism to really having to be just proactive and really taking these stances.

Meike Eilert:

If you think about the pandemic, there are so many inequalities that have been highlighted: financial, social, and then together with the Black Lives Matter movement. It just created this melting pot where consumers and communities were really asking companies and brands, "Where do you stand on this issue?" Because we need change. So even though we have seen this in the past, now consumers are

much more active in demanding change. We have the generation, Gen Z, who care so much, and they are so much more active. They are the ones who are really speaking out and asking companies “What's your position on racial matters?” or “What's your position on climate change?”

Lyn Wineman:

That is true. Over time, the consumer ultimately demands companies to make a shift, and at some point, enough consumers require that demand that the shift happens. It feels like 2020 was that time that a big change happened. As you think about the brands that are being more socially conscious, taking a stand, who do you see doing this really well right now?

Meike Eilert:

There are two brands that I always like to talk about because I think they are really a model for how to engage in activism. The first one is Ben & Jerry's. If you're not following their social media and what they're doing, then I totally encourage you to do that. I'm sure we've all gone to the supermarket and seen some of their activism in their products. Especially if you think back to about three years ago, they launched a flavor called “Pecan Resist.” As Nebraskans, thinking about Standing Rock and the pipeline and all the demonstrations that went on here, Ben & Jerry's has been involved in so many different issues. They're using their products to speak out.

Meike Eilert:

They are one of the companies that have a corporate activism manager. They really have this ingrained in their entire organization. What makes them stand out even beyond that is that they understand the issues they're talking about. They have been engaged for a long time, and they take a strong stance that's very clear. They're just really upfront. They speak the language. It's so interesting to see. We've seen them speak out during Black Lives Matter right from the beginning. They're using the right terminology.

Meike Eilert:

They posted a very long statement on social media about the insurrection on Jan. 6. During that time the media was still being called out for using incorrect terminology. “This is not a protest. This is insurrection.” Ben & Jerry's came out with a very clear statement and said, “This is what it is. This is what we need to do,” and they've been on the front for that.

Meike Eilert:

Patagonia is another company that has this ingrained in their entire business model, and they actually have a separate tab on their website that just talks about activism. What I find so interesting about Patagonia is that they engage in activism on so many different levels. They support grassroots movements, and you can find resources about that from the company. But they're also very aggressive in the stances they're taking.

Meike Eilert:

For example, a few years back when the former president was trying to reduce the Bears Ears Monument, they came out and changed their website to say “The president stole your land” in white font on a black background. That's a very clear and strong message, and definitely caused conversation. They're engaging in strong messaging similar to Ben & Jerry's. You know they care a lot. They're clearly

not concerned about potential backlash, so they are much more vocal and send a much stronger message.

Meike Eilert:

With Patagonia, you can also see that they're targeting, with petitions, government structures. But on the other hand, they're also using these grassroots movements to build it from the ground up. That's what I think is very interesting about Patagonia. Those two are the brands I would say are the strongest in the mainstream market right now.

Lyn Wineman:

I love those two examples, because even though they are in the mainstream market, I would say those are both premium, affluent brands. They have higher priced, quality products. They're not necessarily attempting to attract everyone. They're very targeted in their approach and in their product line. They know exactly who they are. I think, therefore, they can be bolder, and it makes sense for them. But I'm also curious, in all of your research, why is it a smart decision for companies like Patagonia and Ben & Jerry's to share their values as part of their marketing messaging?

Meike Eilert:

First of all, as I previously mentioned, consumers care. From the company's perspective, you want to be transparent: "These are our values." Because if you don't share this, consumers will inevitably find out, especially now that information is so accessible and the interest is there. The other reason it is important that companies share this is they set norms and standards in the market. If they engage in activism and don't tell anyone, then their consumers won't know. Their consumers won't adapt to these stances or engage in these types of behaviors. And their competition doesn't see it either.

Meike Eilert:

If they see a Patagonia or a Ben & Jerry's being successful by taking such a strong stance, they might say, "Why don't we do that too?" From that perspective, it's very important that companies are vocal when they take these stances. That being said, not every company has to be a Ben & Jerry's or Patagonia, and engage in the strong messaging and be this aggressive. There are other ways they can engage in activism and help further these causes. But ultimately, they should make sure they're communicating this, because they need to show the marketplace, "This is where we stand. This is where we're heading. This is important." Otherwise, we're going to be stuck. We're not going to be making progress on these issues in terms of brand adoption.

Lyn Wineman:

I like that. We have a saying in marketing that having a great product and not advertising it is like winking at a girl in the dark. You'll know you did it, but nobody else will. When I hear you saying activism, it's kind of the same thing. If you have a belief as a company or a brand, if you're not sharing the messaging as part of your marketing mix—even if you're taking action on it—you're not taking it to its full extent. You're not impacting change in the most impactful way. But there are also risks involved in this, right? Have you witnessed brands whose attempts at activism have backfired?

Meike Eilert:

Yeah. There are two instances that are very different, very visible. The first one is the Starbucks *Race Together* campaign that was launched a couple years ago. In that campaign, the CEO was trying to

engage consumers in conversations about racial inequities. You might remember that baristas were asked to put “Race Together” on the cups. There was a hashtag associated with that. This campaign actually received a lot of backlash. I think it was a well-intentioned campaign. I think he wanted to send the right message. There was criticism because he was a white man talking about racial matters that he hadn't directly experienced, but then also it put a lot of the burden on the baristas and the consumers. It was not implemented well because it was not at the right point in the consumer journey. When you go and grab a cup of coffee in the morning, you don't want to engage in these types of conversations, even if you care about them.

Meike Eilert:

The implementation is one thing. But from my perspective, what really backfired was that ultimately this discussion took away from the actual cause, because all of a sudden the media was just talking about the backlash, what he did wrong and what could have gone better instead of focusing on the issue and discussing inequality. It was a distraction from the actual issue that he was trying to promote and move along. That's one case where it backfired in the implementation.

Meike Eilert:

Another case where we saw an attempt of a brand that received backlash was Nike last year. This was interesting, because in years before I was pleasantly surprised that they launched the first performance hijab for Muslim women athletes. I thought that was a great product introduction. It was a market that wasn't tapped at all. It wasn't really thought about. That was a really inclusive product to launch.

Meike Eilert:

But then during Black Lives Matter—this is where consumers pay attention—Nike created a social media account where it started posting about experiences of black employees at Nike. And consumers just talked about how there's no diversity on the boards and in Nike in general. So they took a stance, but they hadn't followed through. They didn't put their money where their mouth is. Consumers noticed.

Meike Eilert:

There was this discrepancy between what Nike was saying and where they were as a company. That created backlash. Those two are some good examples of where companies have faced backlash. Over the last summer there were quite a few brands that were called out by people saying they're “woke-washing” because they were posting the black square on social media to engage in #blackoutTuesday, but it was just a symbolic gesture for many of them.

Lyn Wineman:

Interesting. I talked recently on a podcast with Ava Thomas, who is the president and publisher of the *Lincoln Journal Star*, and one of the things she said was, “Walk the talk.” What that meant to her was that if you're going to go out and say something, you need to live it, and I think that's what you're saying about these brands too. If you're going to put forth a social activism campaign, it can't just be surface level. You have to believe in the issue, and you have to live the issue all the way through your organization, because it will come out. It seems like there are no secrets anymore. It will come out somewhere if you're not truly living it.

Lyn Wineman:

So, Meike, what suggestions do you have for companies, big or small, that might want to take a position on social issues?

Meike Eilert:

That really relates to the examples I mentioned. You have to clean up your house first. It doesn't mean you have to wait until you're completely done, but you should at least signal to the market—to your community—that you're making progress. You're taking action because you care, and you want to see changes. Right now we're seeing major companies like Apple, for instance, putting money into educating their black workforce. They also have incubators now. They're making investments that are geared towards promoting diversity in tech. That would be the first one—working on improving. I would also say be conscientious about the social issue. Learn and listen, and help out where needed, but don't distract (like in the Starbucks case). It's not about you. It's about the social issue. You don't want to take the spotlight. That is not where you should be. If you're doing it for the spotlight, then you're doing activism wrong.

Meike Eilert:

The last one is just what you were saying: walk the talk.

Lyn Wineman:

Walk the talk, yeah.

Meike Eilert:

Yes. You might get away with being a little bit more lenient when you're engaged in more corporate social responsibility (CSR), where you're not talking about quite as controversial or hot topic social issues. Consumers might be a little more lenient if you're embellishing in your marketing, but when it comes to topics such as climate change or gun control or diversity and inclusion, you have to really take action.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah, you can't fake it. You can't embellish. You have to be really true to what you're saying is important to you. This is a really hot topic right now, but you, Meike, have actually been doing scientific research in this area for over 10 years. I was trying to think back 10 years ago, which would have been 2010-2011, and I can't think of any examples of social activism by brands. I'm sure there were some. But I'm curious what got you interested in this topic? How did you end up on this path?

Meike Eilert:

I should say I started out working in corporate social responsibility. Activism is really an evolution in some ways of that. It's almost an extreme CSR behavior, if you want to see it that way. I got involved in this topic during grad school, and that was the time when there was a lot of discussion about being more sustainable at business schools. I got involved in working groups. That was about the time when a lot of researchers were starting to shift the conversation from "Does CSR help the bottom line?" to "When does it actually help?"

Meike Eilert:

Before that, there was a lot of attempting to prove it mattered. Then we started having the conversation about “When does it actually matter?” I find problems interesting where there's not really a clear answer. In some cases, companies might get punished for engaging in, for example, being more sustainable just because it's such an expenditure. In other cases, they're being really rewarded. We see this with activism. In some cases, they take a stance and they get all the backlash. Then others are lauded for being such a strong advocate.

Meike Eilert:

I got interested in trying to understand ways in which companies can engage in these behaviors more successfully, and also what drives some of their behaviors to begin with. From that, it morphed. You research and you learn and you meet new co-authors. For me, the turning point where I shifted more into activism and how marketing can have a positive impact on social issues was the presidential election. It was ... yeah ... challenging. I'm an immigrant, and one of the first acts was to implement a ban. So from a personal level, it was a very hard time. I was trying to figure out what I could do to help make progress on some of these issues, what was within my skillset and how I could use my voice.

Meike Eilert:

I ended up working on a project with a team of researchers where we applied a marketing and consumption lens on the issue of violence against women.

Meike Eilert:

In Nebraska, human trafficking is a big deal. We're trying to find ways in which we can shed light on this issue, and also work towards policies that we can implement that could potentially help reverse some of these or eradicate this problem. In this specific topic, we used a consumption perspective to do that. That shifted my research into more of the policy area. Part of that was just learning more about race in the marketplace—diversity, inclusion. I work with some co-authors who are also part of the LGBTQ+ community. You hear a lot of different perspectives as a researcher.

Meike Eilert:

All of this really shaped the direction my research has gone, the conversations I have engaged in, and what we're working on now and in the future. It's an evolution. That's all I can say.

Lyn Wineman:

I like that. You truly have walked the talk too. You've come down a very interesting journey, and I can see that you have decided to apply yourself in your career towards issues you're very passionate about. I can always tell when I'm talking to somebody who has that passion behind what they do, because it lights them up and takes them to another level. Another thing, I think people might listen to this and think, *Well, that's great, but Meike is an academic. She's a researcher. Does she really know what it's like to do business?* But fun fact, I read that you are a food cart owner, so an entrepreneur as well. I'm curious, how has your entrepreneurial experience impacted your mindset on this work?

Meike Eilert:

Yeah. I actually don't own it anymore, unfortunately, but the question is very interesting. I think it really goes back to activism and grassroots. There are a lot of similarities. To me, it really just showed me that if you're interested in something, you can go do it. It is hard work, definitely, but if you find something of interest to you, you can shape it in the way you want to. There were quite a few events that we did that

were focused on inclusivity. For example, we were at Pride, a Pride-related event. As a business owner, you have an opportunity to support the causes you want to.

Meike Eilert:

The other thing I learned, or maybe it was just reinforced for me, is the importance of community and community well-being. We would not have had the opportunities we did without the Lincoln community—without the connections we had. You really see how different businesses work together and help each other. That was really nice to see. I knew it beforehand, but it's great to be part of it and to collaborate on some topics.

Lyn Wineman:

Yeah. I would say that's true. You always kind of know that the business community works together, but when you see it you see businesses coming together for the right reasons and helping one another. I think it has happened quite a lot during the pandemic. A few good things have come out of this crazy time, and I think that's one of them.

Lyn Wineman:

I also know in talking to you and reading your blog that you're shifting some of your focus to activism. I know you have studied youth social entrepreneurs and their ecosystems. I'm curious what you are learning from this kind of new focus in your work.

Meike Eilert:

Yeah. In many ways, they go hand-in-hand. The youth changemakers, the social entrepreneurs who are right now in high school or in college, they're going to be the ones in charge of—they already are in charge of—nonprofits and companies. They're the ones who are ultimately making their way into the marketplace. They're going to grow. This is where we'll start seeing more and more of the shift.

Meike Eilert:

I learned that first of all, you should never underestimate young people, their tenacity, how much they care, what they can do, and how much they know. Oftentimes as adults, we go in and we're like, "Well, you're not of age yet. What do you know?" But they do. They care. Regardless of which barriers we try to put in their way, they find a way to climb them. They are very creative and passionate, and it's amazing to see what is happening and how much support there is now. Obviously, we can do more to make sure we support these passions and make sure more nonprofits or social businesses are starting up and being successful.

Meike Eilert:

We did several interviews with changemakers. It's amazing and inspiring to listen to them. It's really like, "Oh yeah, I noticed this. I went to this school, and I noticed these kids didn't have any access to arts. So I went ahead, and designed an entire arts curriculum for these schools." If you think about it, it's their perception—how they perceive their environment and the inequalities they see. And instead of just saying, "Well, that's a shame," they sit down and say, "No. I want to do something. I'm going to do something about this. I'm going to use my skillset." They go and do it. That's been amazing to see.

Lyn Wineman:

I love what you said. Never underestimate the younger generations. From your research, I'm curious, do you have any advice on how older generations and people like me—parents, educators, business leaders, policy makers—how we can help pave the way for a younger generation to affect positive change in the world?

Meike Eilert:

Yeah. I think we should, first of all, listen to them. We should make sure we're not putting any barriers in their way. They don't need that. We might be jaded from the way we've been doing things. Why would you try to discourage someone from changing the world? You never know. They can change the community. They can broaden it. You don't know their potential. I would say just listen and encourage. Then—especially as parents and teachers—expose and educate.

Meike Eilert:

In this research, a lot of the participants got exposed very early on as their parents took them to protests. They gave them books to read that focused on activism, sustainability, climate change and social justice. There's a lot that happens at a very early age, and we as parents and educators can foster.

Meike Eilert:

For the community, for policy makers, try to set up more formal mentorship programs and set resources aside specifically for youth changemakers, not just social entrepreneurs. Make sure there are resources—places for these youth changemakers to go—because they need a network. They still need mentorship in the ... I'm going to use air quotes ... in the "adult world," because they have not learned some of the rules, some of the norms. They need someone to guide them and help them out with that. Help this transformation from a youth changemaker to an adult changemaker.

Meike Eilert:

Do it without judgment, without “adultsplaining,” but as a mentor who can help them and support them and make sure they're getting the resources, the connections, that they need to be successful.

Lyn Wineman:

I love that term, “adultsplaining,” and I know I have been guilty of that as I've seen the eyerolls of my own kids who are all in their 20s now and brilliant young adults on their own. I think the mentorship advice is also really good. I feel like these generations that are coming up are learning skills in a different way. They have access to so much information, and they're learning it and applying it so quickly. I think mentorship and modeling can be really, really important there.

Lyn Wineman:

There's one more topic you have written on recently that I found really interesting, and I want to touch on today. I get to work with and talk to a lot of nonprofit leaders. Now, more than ever, it feels like all nonprofit leaders have more work to do, greater work to do, and are very concerned about fundraising. You collaborated on a study that was published in the *Journal of Marketing Research* on ... I think the title was “How Deviations from Performance Norms Impact Charitable Donations.” It's kind of a long title, but I'm curious, what are some of the findings you can share from that study?

Meike Eilert:

Yeah. I know we tend to make titles a little bit more technical and complicated ...

Lyn Wineman:

I didn't mean to criticize the title, but I was like, "Whoa, that's a long title!"

Meike Eilert:

No, no, no. I did not take it as criticism. I know our titles can be a mouthful sometimes. When I talk about performance norms, what I mean is as a charity, as a nonprofit, oftentimes you benchmark your performance. For example, you might say, "Hey, in this fundraising drive we had 50 percent of people participate. Last year, it was only 30 percent." There's a deviation from what it used to be, so you have an increase of 20 percent. But it could be the other way around too.

Meike Eilert:

You can also say, "Hey, normally we expect 50 percent to be participating, and it's only been 20 percent." That would be a negative deviation. You will do that either to signal you're very successful and hopefully you have other consumers jumping on the bandwagon, or to demonstrate that we need more participation, so this is really urgent.

Meike Eilert:

What we're finding is that there are different consumers who respond differently depending on whether they see this as a positive or a negative deviation. There's the higher participation versus the negative deviation when there's a lower participation. What we see is that consumers who are more independent—which is more common in a culture like the United States where consumers are a more ambitious and achievement-oriented—like these positive deviations. Knowing that there are more people participating makes them more likely to participate in a campaign and donate to a campaign because they feel like they're more likely to achieve the goal of the campaign.

Meike Eilert:

On the other hand, if you have consumers, they're more what we call interdependent. They're more focused on community and family. This is typically what we—on a cultural level—see in Asian cultures, for instance. They're much more motivated by these negative norm deviations. When they see that there's a lack of support, they see there's a need and want to help out. Then they are more likely to donate to these types of campaigns. There's a lot of variation within the U.S. as well, so there's both types of consumers represented in the U.S., but I mentioned this more on the cultural level. The U.S. tends to be a more independent culture versus many Asian countries that are more interdependent. But again, there's a lot of variation.

Meike Eilert:

What we find is you have to communicate to consumers to find a good message to give them. If you have a consumer who's more independent, and you're trying to communicate, "Hey, we need more support," there are ways in which you can do that. You can create a message in such a way that you're focusing on the "we" part—like we're part of a community, so we need your help. We as a community can support this cause.

Meike Eilert:

There are other ways too, which you can add on top of that. For example, a charity or nonprofit might promote a specific cause. For example, you might promote financial literacy, in terms of the terminology. On the other hand, you can frame it as trying to prevent financial illiteracy.

Lyn Wineman:

Oh yeah.

Meike Eilert:

That's prevention focused. This really makes a difference. These independent consumers, for example, can be motivated by saying, "Hey, we're promoting financial literacy." They'll be more turned off by hearing, "Hey, we're preventing financial illiteracy." These are some of the core findings. If you have negative deviations—if you're not performing as well as you did the year before and you're using that benchmark—then focus on “we” using that type of language in your fundraising appeal and focus on promoting in your message. Talk to them about what you are promoting. Don't use anything that talks about prevention—what you're trying to prevent. You're promoting something positive. You're not preventing something negative. This type of message is ultimately what would be the most successful in a situation like we have right now when there are nonprofits struggling to make donations.

Lyn Wineman:

I could listen to you talk about this all day. I think we could do a whole podcast on this topic, because I really think that the psychological drivers in charitable giving are even more of a mystery, or more of an important thing to study, in charitable giving than in a consumer purchase decision, because there are certain things that cause you to open your wallet and give a little, give a lot, or close it and give nothing at all.

Lyn Wineman:

You had some great advice there, but if you were going to recap it for our nonprofit friends, what are one or two of your top suggestions for nonprofits to help them with their fundraising efforts?

Meike Eilert:

In the situation we're in right now during the pandemic where money is not as loose, focus on the community, the “we,” like “We can do this together.” Then also focus on this promotion aspect. What is your cause promoting? This is the type of language that will be more beneficial for when you reach out to your donors or potential donors.

Lyn Wineman:

Great advice. That's fantastic. Meike, one of the things I always ask each of our guests is for a few words of wisdom. I'm looking for a Meike Eilert motivational or inspirational quote that might be helpful to others. I'm curious what your words of wisdom are.

Meike Eilert:

That's a huge task.

Lyn Wineman:

Right, right.

Meike Eilert:

Words of wisdom. I was thinking about this, and what I would like to tell listeners is that you don't have to move mountains to create positive change. We all have skillsets. We all know something. We all can do something that creates positive change. It can be a small thing, even just reaching out, extending our hands to our neighbors—virtual neighbors now. Or even just having positive interactions with others. It doesn't have to be this huge gesture. You don't have to really *move* a mountain. You don't have to be the Ben & Jerry's, but you can sign a petition. You can support causes you're interested in. You can attend protests.

Meike Eilert:

I just went to a webinar about the free pantries we have in Lincoln. You can go out, get some groceries, and fill those up. It doesn't have to be a monumental task. You can do something small and have a positive impact on someone else, and change someone else's life and change the community.

Lyn Wineman:

That is so good. I got chills when you first said that. I'm going to say it over again. What I heard you say is “You don't have to move mountains to create positive change.” You had a great explanation of that, but I think that is a great motivator—that ripple effect of just one small thing, just getting started, and then the next thing and the next thing.

Lyn Wineman:

Meike, for people who would like to learn more about you or read some of your research, what is the best way for them to connect with you or find you online?

Meike Eilert:

I have a new website and a new blog. If you Google my name, it should come up. I'm also very easy to find on LinkedIn. Any of you are welcome to connect with me on LinkedIn. I post content from my blog on LinkedIn as well, so that's probably the easiest way to get in touch with me. I would definitely love to connect with all of you. I looked at your podcast, and you have such a wonderful group of speakers in there. I know that your listeners are awesome as well. Please reach out with ideas, with feedback. I'll be happy to connect and chat.

Lyn Wineman:

I will have to say that. I know that works, because you and I connected on LinkedIn. I didn't know you, but I was so intrigued by your title of being ... I have to go back to the beginning here ... of being a corporate social responsibility and activism expert. I was like, “What is that?” Then when I started to read your blog, I was lost in the different articles. It was really great.

Meike Eilert:

As we wrap up our time here together today, what is the one most important thing you'd like our listeners to remember about the work you're doing?

Lyn Wineman:

If I describe my overall work, it's from a very meta perspective. I'm trying to understand how marketing perspectives can have a positive impact on the marketplace and society.

Meike Eilert:

That's fantastic! Meike, that topic is so intriguing. I thank you for sharing your insight with us today, and look forward to reading your blog in the future.

Lyn Wineman:

Thank you very much for having me. It was great to be on your podcast.

Announcer:

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