

ON BUSINESS

# Corporate Activism Gets Its Day. Ben & Jerry's Has Been At It for Decades.

The battle over any issue worth fighting for lasts longer than a news cycle. Just ask the maker of Cherry Garcia and Pecan Resist.



Ben & Jerry's has long been known for taking stances on social issues, but CEO Matthew McCarthy, shown here at an exhibit of artwork by formerly incarcerated artists at the company's factory, says it can do more. 'We haven't done enough to bring equity into the business,' he says.

PHOTO: BEN & JERRY'S



By

[John D. Stoll](#)

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Almost everything a business does can be measured. Bump up the marketing budget, did sales go up? Apply Six Sigma, did quality rise? Get rid of paper coffee cups, did carbon footprints shrink?

This past week, after George Floyd was killed while in the custody of Minneapolis police, we witnessed a herd of companies committing to do something that is hard to chart on spreadsheets: address America's structural racism problems.

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“To be silent is not an option,” Netflix Inc. posted on Twitter. That sentiment was echoed by C-Suites coast to coast. General Motors Co. Chief Executive [Mary Barra](#) is assembling an internal advisory board on equality; [Walmart](#) Inc. [WMT +0.50% ▲ brokered a deal](#) to move a confederate soldier statue in its hometown of Bentonville, Ark.; companies far and wide wrote checks to worthy causes, with sums ranging from pocket change to [\\$10 million](#).

And CEOs [joined a Zoom gathering of 300 leaders](#) from business and government to talk about race and the need for change.

Then there was Ben & Jerry's.

“The murder of George Floyd was the result of inhumane police brutality that is perpetuated by a culture of white supremacy,” the ice-cream maker said on its website this past week. In a [700-word statement](#), the company supplied a four-point plan to “dismantle white supremacy in all its forms.”

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Its widely circulated response to the events of recent days generated far more discussion than the warmed-over platitudes some other companies were offering. But any corporate leader looking to emulate the ice-cream maker needs to realize that an authentic attempt to make a difference on issues that matter can't be a one-day exercise. As the team in charge of Ben & Jerry's knows, the fight over any issue worth fighting for lasts longer than a news cycle.

Founded by a pair of hippies in the late 1970s, the maker of Chunky Monkey and Cherry Garcia is still wading deep into social-justice campaigns even as it enters its third decade

of being owned by food conglomerate **Unilever** PLC. Ben & Jerry's current CEO, a 52-year-old **Unilever** veteran named Matthew McCarthy, ties his curly hair into a ponytail and talks about the company's shortcomings as much as he highlights success.

“The founders were two white guys. We're still a really white company. And we haven't done enough to bring equity into the business,” Mr. McCarthy emailed me Wednesday not long after our latest chat about corporate ethics. “Ben & Jerry's is not yet living up to its own promise.”

This is from the CEO of a company whose founders—Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield—rewrote the rules of how a for-profit enterprise engages in thorny political or social issues. “We didn't just want to be a cog in the economic machine that was oppressing a whole lot of people,” Mr. Cohen told me last year, in an interview he conducted while on the campaign trail with Bernie Sanders. “We wanted to alleviate some of the problems that business creates. We broke a lot of rules.”

Mr. McCarthy's assessment of the company's progress, or lack of it, is as daunting for those trying to follow in the footsteps of Messrs. Cohen and Greenfield as it is honest.

Ben & Jerry's has for years committed big bucks to promoting causes like Black Lives Matter or Occupy Wall Street. It has also taken on immigration issues in recent years. As much as one-fifth of the discretionary marketing budget—earmarked for advertising production, sponsorships and branding activities—goes to these endeavors.



Among Ben & Jerry's politically tinged flavors is Pecan Resist, with chocolate ice cream, fudge chunks, pecans, walnuts, fudge-covered almonds and a marketing message that urges buyers to 'peacefully resist the Trump administration's regressive and discriminatory policies.'

PHOTO: BEN & JERRY'S

The company this year started encouraging franchisees running Scoop Shops to designate—and pay—a staffer to shepherd in-store activism. These “changemakers”—many earning far above minimum wage—are deployed in 90 of Ben & Jerry’s 250 U.S. parlors.

Pick up a carton of the cinnamony/chocolatey Justice ReMix’d flavor and you’ll see a 55-word write-up on the Advancement Project splashed across half the container. That nonprofit addresses what it sees as excessive incarceration policies and works to close down certain detention centers. It advocates for better education options for communities of color. Its recent #FreeBlackMamas campaign in Michigan aims to liberate incarcerated mothers.

“They walk the walk,” Judith Browne Dianis, the Advancement Project’s executive director, told me this week when I asked her about Ben & Jerry’s. “It’s not just about cutting a check and walking away.”

She said there is no way to quantitatively value the publicity her organization received on a million-plus pints sold, or replicate the goodwill earned when the Ben & Jerry’s trucks roam U.S. cities giving out free ice cream to anyone willing to listen to a spiel about social justice.

Joseph Kenner, president and CEO of Greyston, which owns Greyston Bakery in Yonkers, N.Y., said the “lion’s share” of his company’s revenue comes from supplying ingredients to Ben & Jerry’s. Greyston has a no-background-check hiring procedure, and many of these brownies mixed into Ben & Jerry’s ice cream are baked by ex-offenders who may have struggled to otherwise land a job.

Mr. Cohen started buying from Greyston in the 1980s largely because of this policy.

Mr. McCarthy said the road to consistent activism has plenty of potholes for companies that aim to make a profit.

“We are a business, we are not a philanthropy,” he said. “We are experts at making ice cream.” The do-well-by-doing-good mantra sounds good, but can be overwhelmed by the complexities that govern corporate life.

The company champions paying what it calls a living wage of nearly \$18 to its hourly workers, for instance, but it can’t force its franchisees to follow suit. It is attempting to

replicate Greyston's no-barriers hiring policy, but that leads to concerns about safety in the factory.

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Taking a stand also exposes a company to backlash. Ben & Jerry's, for instance, has faced [boycotts from grocers](#) and customers for certain policies. The company has been criticized for its support of the 2017 Women's March, for instance, because it was partially organized by activists who have been accused of anti-Semitic views.

[Some human rights](#) groups, meanwhile, have ripped Ben & Jerry's for doing business in Jewish settlements in the West Bank.

Mr. McCarthy said the company doesn't always get social activism right, but it isn't afraid of making mistakes. "Businesspeople, in general, don't like to fail," he said. The trick is to keep at it.

Mary-Hunter McDonnell, who [studies corporate activism](#) at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, said the biggest risk to credibility is not failure—it's inconsistency or hypocrisy. "There's a lot of responsibility that comes with sticking your neck out."

Ben & Jerry's has reached out for help in getting more consistent. Minorities who own Scoop Shops, for instance, are leading a study of how to locate parlors in poorer areas where the brand is currently underrepresented. Two consulting firms, Race Forward and Equity & Results, have been hired to help the overall activist approach.

"Equity is not a destination," Mr. McCarthy said. "It's definitely a process." It's messy, the situations can get sticky, but the company figures it's worth the licks.

Write to John D. Stoll at [john.stoll@wsj.com](mailto:john.stoll@wsj.com)

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