

What do we mean by “brand engagement”?

Brand engagement is a strategy that attempts to leverage the power that brand buyers have over their suppliers in order to achieve remediation of worker right violations or solutions to longer-term systemic issues in global supply chains.

Trade unions, women’s and other labour rights organizations sometimes turn to brand engagement and/or campaigning after workplace and other national legal channels to resolve problems have been exhausted.

What types of engagement are possible?

Depending on the circumstances and objectives, engagement can be initiated with an individual brand, a group of brands, an industry association or a multi-stakeholder initiative.

Engagement can be initiated in response to:

- worker rights violations at a particular factory -- such as firings of workers for union organizing;
- systemic issues facing workers in a particular country -- such as factory fires and building safety in Bangladesh; and
- systemic issues in global supply chains -- such as gender-based discrimination or precarious work.

Engagement can involve civil society organizations in producer countries in direct dialogue with a brand or group of brands, or can be mediated through a Northern (usually North American or European) counterpart organization that has historical experience engaging with this particular brand or group of brands.

In some instances, brand engagement has been used to convince a group of brands to take a public position on a labour or human rights issue in a particular country, such as the 2012 letter to the government of Guatemala signed by seven brands asking for action on a CAFTA labour rights complaint, which contributed to a resolution of that case. A second example is a joint letter signed by six brands to the president of Peru in March 2013 expressing support for the repeal of a law allowing employers in the garment export sector to hire workers on consecutive short-term employment contracts.

Making strategic choices about campaigning versus engagement

Engagement can take place prior to the launching of a campaign, at different moments in a campaign when a brand is open to constructive dialogue, or independent of any campaigning (with the intention of resolving an issue without the need to resort to a public campaign).

Decisions about whether and when to engage or campaign can be based on a number of factors, including historical experience dealing with a particular brand, whether the particular issue or issues are ones that the brand has been willing to act on in the past, and your assessment of how much potential there is to mobilize public and/or economic pressure on one or more brand buyers around these particular issues.

Sometimes brands will be willing to engage in constructive dialogue because they believe there is a credible threat that a campaign will

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How and when to engage with brands?

be launched, even before any actual campaigning has taken place. In many cases, a credible third-party investigation of the alleged violations can open the door to constructive engagement or provide verified evidence that will be useful for a campaign.

MSN usually attempts to engage first with the brand(s) and only launches a campaign when and if the brand shows it is unwilling to seriously address the issue in dispute. However, it is important to be able to judge when a brand is merely going through the motions of dialogue in order to avoid a campaign. In the midst of a campaign, it is also important to be able to judge when is the right moment to initiate or respond to a request for dialogue, since most successful campaigns are resolved through constructive dialogue.

How and where are brands vulnerable?

Companies -- such as Nike, Gap, and adidas -- that market their products on the basis of brand image and attempt to maintain and expand their share of the market on the basis of brand loyalty are the most vulnerable to media exposés and/or public campaigns about sweatshop abuses.

However, even some companies that do not invest very much in brand identity, such as t-shirt manufacturers Hanesbrands, Fruit of the Loom and Gildan Activewear, are vulnerable to targeted campaigns focused on sectors of their market that care about these issues, such as US and Canadian universities.

Oftentimes brands are caught by surprise by media reports of labour rights abuses in particular factories because production has been outsourced by intermediaries (sourcing agents) or subcontracted by their supplier to a subcontract sewing facility without the brand's knowledge. That puts them on the defensive and is a clear illustration that they don't have control over their supply chain.

Brands are most vulnerable regarding issues that are of highest concern to Northern consumers and Northern media, such as child labour, deaths in factory fires, forced pregnancy testing, and are less vulnerable on issues like freedom of association. However, numerous cases of workers being fired for organizing unions have forced some high-profile brands, as well as those servicing the university market, to pay more serious attention to this issue.

Despite these vulnerabilities, brands obviously have considerable power as compared to trade unions, women's groups, labour rights organizations and other civil society groups, including enormous financial and human resources to mobilize in defense of their brand image, threats of legal action against campaign groups that make allegations concerning their labour practices, and a new corporate social responsibility industry that feeds the myth that significant progress is being made on factory conditions.

However, the power of brands can be countered through strategic alliances. Alliances of local and international trade union, women's, student, and labour rights organizations have been successful in winning advances for workers through a combination of local organizing, campaigning and engagement.