

**Marketing**

# **Marketing Meets Mission**

by Myriam Sidibe

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**Summary.** A lot of global health problems can be prevented by persuading people to alter their behavior—something marketers excel at. That’s why brands have a critical role to play in tackling these challenges, says Sidibe, Unilever’s first social mission director. In this article she... [more](#)

**A beer brand might seem** an unlikely ally in the campaign to end violence against women. But the clear connection between alcohol and abusive behavior made Carling Black Label, the largest beer brand in South Africa, realize it had to take up the challenge.

The brand has long targeted men, and its messaging has been all about defining masculinity. In the 1980s its television ads featured cowboys who deserved a cold Carling Black Label as a reward for a long day's work. In the 1990s, when South Africa abolished apartheid, Carling's ads depicted a nation of builders: Ordinary men were now the heroes—strong, honest, and hardworking. In the 2000s the brand connected the beer with entrepreneurs and the rising generation of “self-made” men, the new role models.

That's where things stood when AB InBev bought Carling's owner, SABMiller, in 2016. Andrea Quaye, then AB InBev's new vice president of marketing for Africa, understood how valuable the brand was, but she also knew it couldn't continue with business as usual. As the acquisition was going through, local researchers were raising alarms about the country's drinking problem. South Africans are among the heaviest drinkers on the continent, and men are by far the major consumers. This excess has many consequences, but among the most troubling are rates of murder and violence targeting women that far exceed the global average.

Rather than trying to distance itself from the problem, Carling decided to confront it and use its clout to drive social change. That required taking some responsibility—and risk. It wanted to keep South African women safe and maintain the brand's leadership position, but at the same time, it had to stay true to its heritage as an emblem of masculinity.

The question was: How to do it?

### **Pursuing Purpose**

How do you get people to thoroughly wash their hands? Or to stay six feet away from others as part of a precautionary “social distancing” protocol? Or to refrain from visiting loved ones in

nursing homes? These questions have taken on a life-or-death relevance during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

But long before they were in the headlines, I'd spent my career studying and trying to solve challenges like this. I'm convinced that brands can and must play a critical role in tackling global health issues, from violence to infectious disease to poor fitness and diet. Most of these problems can be prevented—often through the adoption of new behaviors and positive norms.

## **Brands and companies with a social purpose energize employees.**

Some of my interest in how businesses in general—and marketers in particular—can address public health problems comes from the years I spent living in regions where they're acute. As the daughter of a United Nations economist and health official, I grew up in Mali and more than 20 other countries. As a professional adult I worked in dozens more, mostly emerging nations.

While earning a doctorate in public health at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, I began to examine the ways that businesses could help improve global health. One is through marketing, which, when infused with the right mission, can have a powerful impact. After all, influencing behavior is what marketers do best.

I officially joined Unilever in 2006 and soon became the company's first social mission manager. I stayed there for more than a dozen years, and in that role I worked to embed public health goals into the business model of the company's 125-year-old Lifebuoy soap brand. I engaged partners—including NGOs, UN organizations, and even competitors Procter & Gamble and Colgate-Palmolive—to help us launch a vast initiative to promote handwashing throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America, where it could prevent disease and save hundreds of thousands of lives.

In 2019 the brand hit its goal of reaching one billion people with handwashing messages, which have had a clear effect on behavior and health.

It's hard to measure the impact of these messages precisely, in part because our effort is one of many public health initiatives that governments and others have set up. But a randomized, controlled trial involving 2,000 families in India showed that handwashing with Lifebuoy soap led to a 25% reduction in diarrhea, a 15% reduction in acute respiratory infections, and a 46% reduction in eye infections. Since the launch of the Lifebuoy programs we have also seen a sizable drop in child mortality due to diarrhea and pneumonia in countries where we established them. At the same time, Lifebuoy has become one of Unilever's fastest-growing brands and is now the world's best-selling antibacterial soap. In fact, at Unilever, brands with a social mission, including Lifebuoy, grew 46% faster than the rest of the business and delivered 70% of revenues from 2017 to 2018.

The handwashing program and others like it build on the concept of *shared value*, the idea—advanced by Michael Porter and Mark Kramer of Harvard Business School—that companies should generate economic value in ways that promote social good. As they wrote nearly a decade ago, “Shared value is not social responsibility, philanthropy, or even sustainability, but a new way to achieve economic success.” But while they described the social benefits that companies could provide through their products and value chains and through economic development, I'm focusing on those produced by brand activities and purpose-led marketing, such as communications and educational programs that promote more-healthy habits and positive norms.

### **A Framework for Brands**

That a soap brand would promote handwashing makes perfect sense. But, as AB InBev's Quaye understood, the connection between a brand and its public health goals needn't be obvious at first, though it does need to be rational. In selling social programs to stakeholders, from management to partners to customers, a brand must make a solid case that it can positively affect behavior and that it has some license to try.

In my book *Brands on a Mission* I describe how a toothpaste brand helped address school absenteeism (oral health issues are a major cause); a building materials and equipment company improved poor sanitation in India, Bangladesh, and Tanzania; and, yes, a beer brand is tackling domestic violence. The connections between those brands and their health goals are legitimate if indirect. More often, brands leverage more-overt expertise and connections, as Lifebuoy did. However, even when the rationale is clear, it doesn't mean that buy-in from stakeholders will be easy to get or that executing such initiatives will be straightforward.

In my work leading Unilever's social mission programs and my research during my current sabbatical at Harvard, I developed a framework that can help any brand connect a purpose to its business and enhance its social impact. I describe it as a *purpose tree*, in which civic initiatives are simultaneously sustained by five deep roots: behavioral change, internal support, measurement, partnerships, and systemic change.

## **1. Inspiring Behavioral Change**

Typically the tools of marketers—market research, product innovation, communications, incentive schemes, and more—are used to increase profits, but they can just as readily be employed to change habits and social norms for the public good.

Consider Knorr, a €3 billion Unilever brand that includes bouillon cubes, a century-old product line with a large global market. As part of a broad push to address malnutrition, Knorr identified iron-deficiency anemia as a serious health threat in developing countries, particularly for young women. Focusing first on Nigeria, where nearly half of reproductive-age women suffer from anemia, Knorr developed a new iron-fortified bouillon product and launched a campaign encouraging women and teenage girls to add it and iron-rich leafy green vegetables to stews.

Public health organizations had long been urging Nigerians to include leafy greens in their recipes but had been stymied by a belief that adding the greens would ruin foods' flavor. So, rather than leading with the health benefits of iron, Knorr's ads focused on mother-daughter bonding around cooking and on how simple

and delicious it could be to add greens to stews. The campaign included celebrity testimonials and a school program featuring the Nigerian pop singer Yemi Alade, whose catchy “Toss, Stir, Crumble” song and dance moves helped drive home the point.

Once people started trying greens in stews, they became more likely to try greens in other dishes. A controlled study comparing leafy green and bouillon use in two towns—one exposed to the messaging and one not—showed that the program was decisively changing behavior. In the first town the number of people who added greens to stews increased 41% and people who added bouillon to soups rose 28%, while in the second those numbers rose only marginally. In addition, the program helped position the brand as a champion of African mothers and daughters, driving its growth.

Since then the program has expanded into Kenya, where it focuses on adding spinach and sister-brand Royco cubes to the national dish *sukuma wiki*, and has been replicated in Myanmar and the Philippines. Knorr now promotes nutritious-cooking initiatives around the globe in collaboration with retailers and other partners, emphasizing 50 healthful ingredients (the Future 50) and encouraging consumers to use less salt and oil.

Basic marketing principles apply in any brand program, but there are some special considerations for marketers of brands with public health aspirations. Among the questions they should ask are these:

- What behavioral changes can we promote that will most effectively support both the brand and its social goals, and will we be able to measure them?
- What is the best way for the brand to encourage these behaviors?
- Are we confident this effort will enhance existing public sector programs (in other words, are our efforts in this arena needed)?
- Do we have the social license to mount an effective initiative (that is, will consumers and potential partners trust and embrace the brand in its purpose-based role)?

- Do we have the leadership support, resources, and expertise needed to pilot a successful initiative and scale it up?

## **2. Winning Internal Support**

No matter how dedicated its leaders are, a social initiative will struggle if it doesn't have support throughout the organization, from the CEO to the front lines. At Unilever, I spent a lot of time gaining and maintaining internal backing. It helped, of course, that our CEO at the time, Paul Polman, was visionary and threw his full support behind our social initiatives (a legacy embraced and extended by our current CEO, Alan Jope). But there certainly were individuals and functions that had to be brought along.

One of the biggest challenges of the Lifebuoy initiative, for example, was working with corporate communications, a function that is risk-averse in any company. Social-purpose initiatives are risky in a variety of ways, including their potential to damage the company's reputation if they go sideways. But communications and many other functions, including legal affairs, finance, and HR, are essential to the success of these programs, so program leaders must get them on board. In part this is a matter of simple evangelism—persistently sharing a program's goals, expected benefits to the company and society, and actual impact. Recruiting like-minded colleagues from across the organization early on can be invaluable in helping sway people and functions that may be on the fence or may present obstacles.

Because social programs take years to get results and are demanding, they need corporate-level support, too. Ultimately, most functions will probably play a role in a program. Some companies, including Unilever, even establish separate divisions for sustainable business, global advocacy and partnerships, or shared value, which support brands' initiatives.



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## **How Lifebuoy Fights Disease**

The soap brand developed programs in Africa, Indonesia, and India to reduce disease through handwashing. ...



When attracting allies, expertise, and financing, be up-front about the challenges you face. Whether you're pitching the program to a department, a unit, the CEO, or the board, be clear about the companywide commitment needed and the time and resources it will take to achieve large-scale impact. At the same time, be convincing about the benefits. Frame the initiative as an



investment, not a cost, one that can help the company differentiate itself, attract customers, stake positions in future markets, gain valuable new capabilities (such as in product innovation and partnerships), and recruit and retain talent—all while demonstrating the company's best qualities to the world and creating public good.

The impact on talent can't be overstated: Brands and companies with a social purpose energize employees. And passionate employees will knock down walls to solve problems and find creative ways to succeed. HR can become a crucial ally here, helping create career paths and incentive systems that reward employee engagement in the social mission and are appealing to potential hires.

### **3. Measuring Performance**

Tracking the impact of marketing is difficult, but measuring the effects on public health is particularly hard. The tools are still being developed, and the science is constantly evolving. One thing I've learned at Unilever is not to let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

Consider the challenge we faced with metrics for the Lifebuoy handwashing program. First we thought we'd simply track soap sales. But because people in our target countries regularly used soap for bathing, we weren't confident that sales volume was a good proxy for handwashing. We thought about just asking people about their handwashing, but that would be subject to large reporting biases. We even piloted tracking handwashing by putting smart chips in soap bars, but we found they were prohibitively expensive and raised privacy concerns. Eventually, we decided to distribute diaries in which people could record their handwashing with stickers. While this approach probably didn't eliminate reporting bias, after testing it in partnership with the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine we concluded that the results were accurate enough, and indeed this approach has now been validated by other organizations.

Despite the obstacles, measurement is essential. By tracking the resources devoted to different projects and the progress toward social goals, brands can identify the most cost-effective strategies. Project teams need to gather performance data on three levels:

### **Brand level.**

Are the efforts boosting sales, margins, and market penetration? Are they increasing purchase intent? Are they helping differentiate the brand and building brand equity?

**Brand Say, Brand Do**

It's important to distinguish between what Unilever refers to as "brand say" communications about ...

↘

Not only has Lifebuoy become one of Unilever's fastest-growing brands, but it had a compound annual growth rate of 9.6% from 2008 to 2018. The brand is now widely associated with handwashing programs in the public mind, and its social programs have helped it expand in African and Asian markets.

### **Organizational level.**

Are the program's purpose and performance sustaining project teams' motivation? Are they attracting ongoing organizational support, including funding and other resources? Are they engaging employees and helping recruit and retain talent?

Inspired and supported by the Lifebuoy program, for instance, tens of thousands of Unilever employees have gone on to teach handwashing in their schools and communities, a good indicator of the program's effect on engagement.

## **Public level.**

Is the brand effort receiving continued support from business and public sector partners? Is it building trust and attracting favorable recognition, such as awards or praise from NGOs and the media? Is it providing access to partners and networks that the brand wouldn't have otherwise?

For example, because we could show that the Lifebuoy program increased handwashing, health clinics have allowed us to talk to new mothers about hygiene. And as the program demonstrated its value, we were able to add millions of euros from governments, NGOs, and philanthropies to our own resources for piloting new programs and expanding existing ones. In addition, the brand has received hundreds of awards for its social mission work.

Implicit in these questions is the need for any brand claiming a social purpose to be accountable for its performance.

Stakeholders, including nonprofits, governments, investors, and consumers themselves, are reflexively skeptical when commercial brands say they care about social welfare. Reliable measurements can reassure all parties that the brand's efforts are actually doing good and aren't just window dressing.

## **4. Securing Partnerships**

Most brands on a social mission aim to drive transformational change at scale. But they can't do it alone. They need partners to supply complementary skills, expertise, resources, and networks, and must select them carefully to ensure a good fit on goals, process, budgets, and activities.

Partnering with governments and NGOs is mutually beneficial: A company's resources and capabilities help the public sector achieve its goals, and the company gets legitimacy, support when entering markets and expanding, and fresh perspectives that galvanize innovation and learning. Social-purpose partnerships among companies, and even competitors, may be less common, but they can deliver some of those same benefits and sometimes help firms get a lock on a desirable space in the market.

Partnerships played a critical role in Lifebuoy's expansion of its public health mission. One of the most interesting launched in 2014, when Sightsavers, the world's largest organization fighting preventable blindness, connected with Lifebuoy for help in eliminating trachoma, a leading cause of infectious blindness globally. Simple hand and face washing can reduce children's risk by 60%.

Working with Sightsavers, Lifebuoy adapted its successful Super School of Five handwashing program, which features colorful superheroes designed by Craig Yoe, the Muppets' creative director, to teach children good face hygiene and handwashing. The 21-day program includes a pledge, activities, games, songs and dances, competitions, and a certificate of completion and is supported by washing stations installed throughout participating schools. The initiative began in Kenya in 2015 and soon expanded to Ethiopia and Zambia, where hundreds of teachers were trained to deliver it. It has now reached 600,000 children in more than 300 schools. In concert with efforts by governments and other NGOs, the program helped reduce the prevalence of trachoma by 30% in two years.

Following these successes, we secured another partnership, this one with Big Win Philanthropy, to support Ethiopia's Ministry of Health programs to reduce childhood stunting, which is caused in part by poor hygiene. And a promising partnership with the vaccine alliance Gavi promotes handwashing and immunization together in Uttar Pradesh in India. The program expects to reach 2.5 million people by the end of 2020, and discussions are under way to scale it up beyond India.

Through these and other alliances, Lifebuoy is gaining real-world knowledge about improving public health and expanding the brand in new markets. Most of Lifebuoy's partnerships have used coinvestment or other models that pool its resources with partners'. Commenting on these arrangements, global partnerships director Anila Gopal says, "What was previously simply a good thing to have, because it helped build some credibility and add rigor to the programs, has now become the only way to do business."

## 5. Driving Systemic Change

The higher-level goal for social-purpose efforts should be to achieve long-term shifts in social norms and behaviors—by inspiring a groundswell of public support and collaborations that endure far beyond individual campaigns. The engine for this is something I call “brand advocacy.”

Effective brand advocacy has several key characteristics. It promotes a positive vision for the future; it speaks to people’s sense of justice and shared humanity; it uses symbols, language, and cultural references that resonate; it calls for specific, repeatable actions; it gives people agency, making them actors rather than just beneficiaries; and it brings people and communities together on shared platforms and through organizational partnerships.

Certainly handwashing as a key to better health has taken root in countries and communities where it wasn’t the norm a decade ago. Parents, teachers, and children themselves are now spontaneously spreading the word about it. Unilever played a part in that, but it’s truly the result of extensive collaborations over many years.

### **Effective brand advocacy speaks to people’s sense of justice and shared humanity.**

Let’s look at a new case, this one involving the insurance business—not everyone’s idea of a purpose-driven industry. Discovery Limited is a diversified financial group. In only a decade it has become South Africa’s leading health insurer, in part by improving customer health through its Vitality program.

Vitality rewards customers with lower premiums if they adopt healthful behaviors, and it screens their progress through a program called Vitality Healthcheck, which tracks body mass index, blood pressure, and cholesterol levels. It also encourages and tracks exercise and good nutrition. From 2015 to 2018 the

percentage of program members who regularly exercised increased by 34%, members' vegetable purchases increased by 29%, and their sugar and salt purchases fell by 33% and 31%, respectively.

Members also can get up to 25% cash back on fresh fruit, vegetables, and 6,000 other selected products. South African retailers have embraced the concept, with some stores devoting an entire section to Vitality-qualified foods. While the program may seem invasive (and indeed it uses tracking devices from Apple, Garmin, and Suunto to gauge activity), customers are flocking to it for the rewards; the number of Vitality Healthchecks performed increased by 55,000 (21%) during that three-year period.

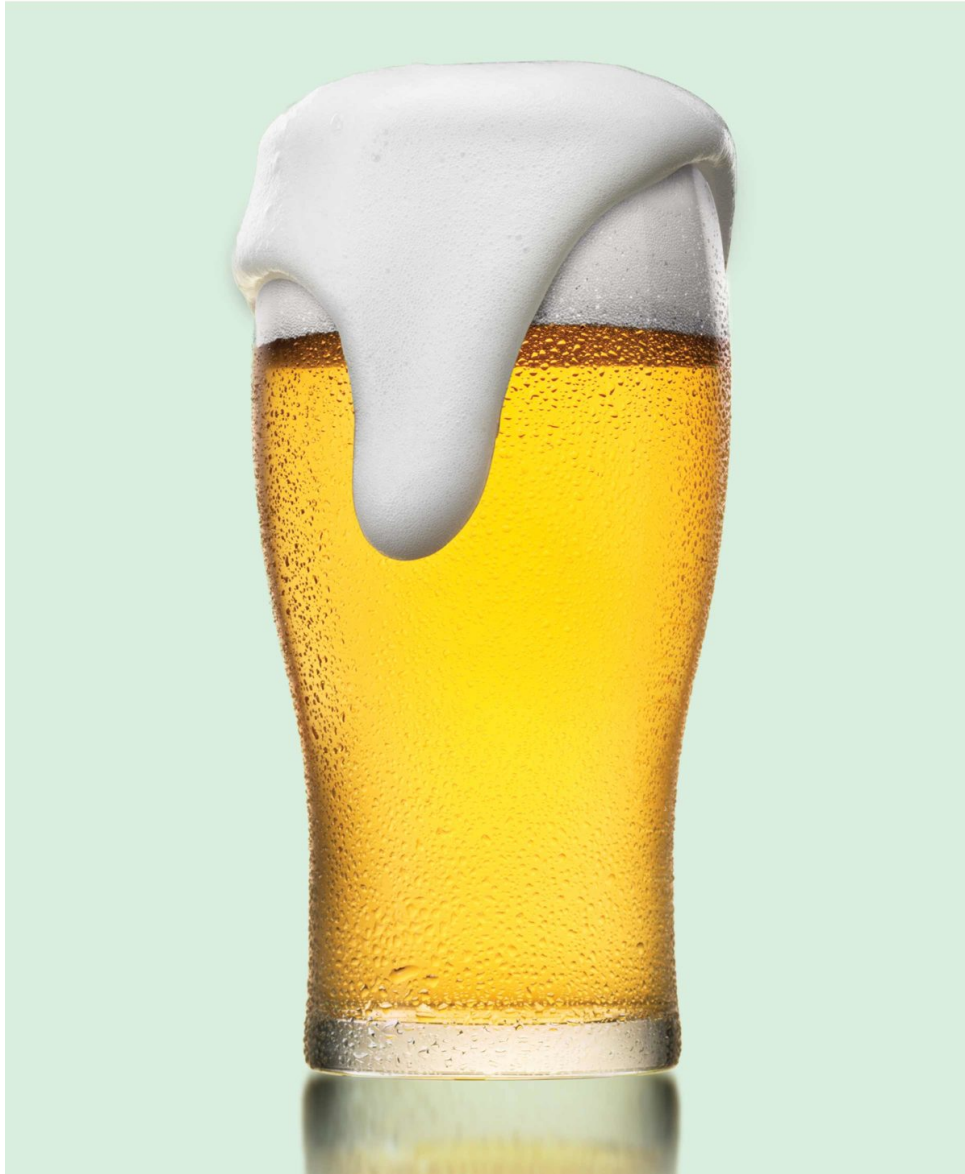
Other leading insurers—AIA, Generali, John Hancock, Manulife, Ping An, and Sumitomo Life—have launched their own Vitality programs, and in 2018 they and Discovery signed a pledge committing to a goal of helping 100 million people become 20% more active by 2025. The pledge aligned the Vitality programs with the World Health Organization's Global Action Plan on Physical Activity and requires competing insurance companies to cooperate in achieving that goal.

What's the upshot? Customers are clearly becoming healthier, and Discovery is saving a boatload of money. Vitality estimates that its healthier insurance pool saved Discovery the equivalent of \$1.2 billion from 2008 to 2018. Vitality is benefiting all involved—the insurers, retailers, technology partners, and consumers. It's a textbook case of creating shared value.

### **The Framework in Action**

Let's return now to Carling and its efforts to prevent violence against women. I've chosen to highlight this initiative because the stakes are so high and the obstacles for the brand so formidable. Unlike a soap brand pursuing hygiene goals, an alcoholic beverage that claims it wants to reduce violence against women must confront the fact that it contributes to the very problem it's seeking to solve.

As the World Health Organization notes, “The research supporting the relation between all forms of aggression and alcohol use is enormous [and] unequivocal.” This connection is not lost on the public; during radio interviews about Carling’s antiviolence programs, Quaye says, she was “lambasted by listeners” who accused Carling’s initiative of being nothing but a marketing ploy.



Jack Andersen/Getty Images

Nonetheless, Carling is showing sustained commitment to an issue it surely has an obligation—and the resources—to address. Let’s look at some of its current programs and the considerable work that remains if the brand is to effect broad change and lay a legitimate claim to its purpose.

In 2017, Carling launched a TV and social media campaign against gender-based violence under the hashtag #NoExcuse. It sponsored a men's march that drew 8,000 people, released five million #NoExcuse cans of beer, and called on South African men to take a pledge to combat violence against women. Building on this, Carling worked with Ogilvy, the global media communications firm, and indaHash, an influencer marketing firm, to take its message to the Soweto Derby, a biannual soccer match that transfixes much of the country.

Just before the March 2018 match began, a group of women formed a circle in the center of the field and launched into "Asambe Nono," the South African soccer anthem, but with new lyrics. The song now described a man returning home after his team had lost and threatening his partner in frustration, and it repeated the refrain "No excuse for women's abuse." The two soccer teams, the Orlando Pirates and the Kaizer Chiefs, joined in as well. The players wore #NoExcuse armbands during the series of games and posed with a banner at the end. Analysts reported that the Soccer Song for Change campaign reached 45 million people.

That year an AB InBev corporate program also launched pilots that sent "smart-drinking squads" into taverns in two poorer communities to work with owners and patrons. The squads trained men to become models of responsible alcohol consumption. Building on that work, the Carling brand then engaged with a local social entrepreneur, Craig Wilkinson, founder of the not-for-profit Father a Nation, to take the squad concept to local soccer associations and colleges and to train "champion men"—influencers who could return to their communities to lead workshops on a range of topics related to men's roles in society, including violence prevention. Wilkinson explains, "We work with local structures in each community. The whole idea is to ignite a fire, to create a movement that doesn't need a big infrastructure or constant involvement from us." By the end of the first year, Carling's training, workshops, and camps had reached 30,000 people.



The brand now intends to engage other companies in a collaboration to reach one million men by 2025, and AB InBev has committed \$1 billion to social marketing and related activities aimed at reducing the abuse of alcohol. In addition, the company plans to ensure that no- or low-alcohol beer products represent at least 20% of its global beer volume by the end of 2025, up from 8% in 2019. (To date it has launched no-alcohol beers in key markets and low-alcohol beers in Canada, South Africa, Australia, and Europe.) “#NoExcuse is the practical embodiment of the dream of helping men become the greatest version of themselves and giving them the tools to fundamentally change society,” says Carling’s brand director, Arné Rust. “Change this deep won’t happen quickly, but we are committed to continuing for however long it takes.”

These are good efforts, but are they achieving the brand’s social goals? The answer is yes, and not yet. Certainly awareness of the problem is growing: Surveys of representative samples of South Africans find that 69% of 18-to-24-year-olds believe the campaigns “break through the silence on domestic abuse.” And the proportion of men now taking a public stand against gender-based violence has risen from 30% to 42%.

But Carling has yet to show that these campaigns have reduced alcohol abuse or violence against women. To be sure, the programs are still young—the champion men effort launched just a year ago. As I found with Lifebuoy, it can take a decade to have a substantial social impact, and measuring it is exceedingly complicated. Nonetheless, all eyes are now on Carling and AB InBev. To succeed they will need to pursue all the strategies laid out in this article.

## **CONCLUSION**

Almost any brand can embrace a social mission that supports the business and makes a real contribution, even a brand whose relationship to that mission is subtle or fraught. But all effective programs will be long-term and challenging and will involve

many stakeholders, including governments and NGOs, employees, customers, and communities—and perhaps even competitors.

### **Choosing Your Social Goal**

To gauge the soundness of a proposed brand purpose, review this checklist. The more conditions you meet, the better ...



I've focused here on public health goals, but any of the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals can serve as a starting point for a brand in search of a mission. They address poverty, hunger, education, climate action, gender equality, economic opportunity, and other global challenges. The framework described here, which has been tested and refined over more than a decade, can help any business or brand start on a purpose-driven journey or accelerate it, build momentum, and produce real change.

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