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A little empathy  
goes a long way:  
How brands can  
engage the American  
Muslim consumer

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# A little empathy goes a long way: How brands can engage the American Muslim consumer

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### *Executive Summary*

There are almost 7 million Muslims living in America, by some estimates, who are together worth more than \$170 billion in spending power. Their consumer behavior differs considerably from non-Muslims, and they are starting to want to see more notice being taken of their unique needs.

Ogilvy Noor research reveals that 86% of American Muslim consumers believe that American companies “need to make more of an effort to understand Muslim values,” but at exactly the same time they are feeling largely ignored by American brands and companies, with 98% feeling that American brands “don’t actively reach out to Muslim consumers.” This despite these consumers showing the potential to be an extremely loyal customer base, with over 80% saying that they would prefer to buy brands that support Muslim identity through promotion and celebration of religious festivals, for example. And it’s not just that these are great consumers to have on your side — it’s also that they can be potentially vastly damaging to have against you. When faced with a brand that has offended Muslims, almost 99% of consumers said that they would stop using it, 65% doing so *even if* the available alternatives were not as good. To make matters even more alarming, a full 83% feel it is their responsibility to inform all their friends and family of what they know of the brand’s behavior. At Ogilvy Noor, we believe the best and, indeed, only way to avoid such a situation is to start with a deep and thorough understanding of Muslim consumer values and of how these values affect daily consumption behavior. Only with this kind of empathy can brands begin to appeal to Muslim consumers on their terms, whether global or American. Almost 75% of our respondents want brands to “make Muslims feel like an integral part of the wider community, not a marginal group.” American Muslim consumers feel a deep need for inclusion in the fabric of American life, especially in such troubled times, and believe that brands and corporate America have a responsibility towards promoting that inclusivity.

So it is that brands in America have a unique role and responsibility in the Muslim consumer’s eyes. We hope that with the right guidance, they will soon be able to empathize and successfully engage this large, loyal and lucrative consumer group for mutual benefit in the long term.

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# What is Ogilvy Noor?

Ogilvy Noor is the world's first specialist Islamic Branding consultancy, launched by Ogilvy & Mather in May 2010. It is a global practice that aims to help brands and companies better understand Muslim consumers worldwide. *Noor* means light in Arabic and encapsulates our aim to illuminate the world of Muslim consumer behavior — a world we feel has too often been approached with fear, apprehension and confusion. Ogilvy Noor has, in conjunction with TNS, conducted two years' worth of global research into the global Muslim consumer market — the values, attitudes and needs that drive their unique consumption behavior and their brand affinities. This thinking was published in the groundbreaking research study “Brands, Islam and the New Muslim Consumer” in June 2010.

Our research taught us that, globally, there are definite shared patterns of Muslim consumption — natural for believers of a faith that clearly prescribes aspects of everyday life in considerable detail. Furthermore, Muslim consumers the world over share the same values that form the basis of their faith, which in turn affects the way they see their relationships with brands and companies, and the standards to which they hold them. Our detailed consumer segmentation also revealed that there is definitely a new kind of Muslim consumer emerging. We call them the “Futurists.” Young, strong in their faith, proud of their identity, ambitious, connected and open to the world, they are the generation that seeks to fuse all aspects of their identity without compromise. To them, faith and progress are inseparable. They are also the generation that is less afraid to ask questions — knowledge-hungry, they want to know the why and how behind everything and demand a completely new level of transparency from brands.

Most of our research to date has been conducted in majority-Muslim markets — we went to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Malaysia. We found marked similarities in consumer behavior in each when it came to how beliefs and values affect modern consumption. But we were also interested in the minority-Muslim markets — markets in which Muslims form a minority of the population. We knew that Muslim consumer behavior in these markets is likely to differ in some significant ways. To validate this thinking, we conducted research among a small sample of American Muslim consumers. And we've learned that, as with Muslims everywhere, while their core values are still the key criteria in their purchase decisions, there are significant differences in how they want brands and companies to engage with them.

The purpose of this paper is to reveal some of the key insights we have uncovered as a result of this small-scale exploratory research, and build on our bank of existing knowledge to recommend a few key success strategies for American brands and

companies seeking to engage with this consumer group. We hope to reveal that once *Shariah* values and the notion of *halal* are properly understood, the leap from branding in its current state to branding that strikes a real chord with Muslim consumers is not at all daunting. In fact, understanding the need for transparency, honesty, community investment and environmental responsibility as demanded by Muslim consumers is an organic route for turning the good branding of today into the good, Muslim-friendly branding of tomorrow. Our research is by no means exhaustive and not intended to predict behavior in other minority-Muslim markets. As we recognize how important this space is, however, we intend to conduct larger-scale research across the UK, US, France, Germany and India in the near future.

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# Muslim America today and the role of brands

It's worth starting by pointing out the considerable overlap in some of the core values of being American and being Muslim — such as a shared high regard for liberty and equality, strong family values, and a belief in hard work and continuous progress. It's also worth noting that Muslim America is incredibly diverse — ethnically, culturally and politically. As recent Gallup research has shown, Muslim Americans are drawn from a multitude of ethnicities and form the religious group in America most evenly spread out along the political spectrum from very liberal to very conservative. The role of faith in American Muslim lives is, however, uniformly important; more than any other religious group in America, Muslims are likely to acknowledge the importance of religion in their lives.<sup>1</sup> This is even more significant for the youth within this group, with 77% of young Muslim Americans saying that religion is an important aspect in their lives, compared with 57% of young Catholic Americans and 42% of young Jewish Americans.<sup>2</sup> Muslim Americans tend to be younger and are among the most highly educated of all religious groups in America. Throughout our research, we therefore aim to better understand the behavior patterns of young Muslim consumers, as they are poised to shape the relationship of their consumer group with brands and companies into the future.

The recent debates and revisitation of issues surrounding Muslim identity in America today serve to underline how important it is to achieve a greater level of understanding of Islam across all aspects of society in America. A key challenge facing young American Muslims today is exactly this: how to champion those values of Islam that are very much in line with those of America — such as liberty, equality, family/community and a strong work ethic — but also going beyond that, into illustrating the values of Islam that are positively beneficial for any society, such as protecting and supporting the vulnerable, protecting the environment, behaving with honesty and transparency, keeping one's word, valuing sincerity in intention, and establishing justice in the face of injustice or oppression. These are just some of the values that form the core of what it means to live by the *Shariah*, and to live as a good Muslim.<sup>3</sup> These are the values that define the moral parameters of all Muslims,

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<sup>1</sup>*The Muslim West Facts Project*, Gallup and the Coexist Foundation, 2009.

<sup>2</sup>*The Muslim West Facts Project*, Gallup and the Coexist Foundation, 2009.

<sup>3</sup>*Shariah*, although often mistaken to refer to Islamic law only, is in fact a much wider system of practices and beliefs. It is a kind of mental and moral compass that is referred to in living the life of a good Muslim. Its values include honesty, peacefulness, sincerity, modesty, humility, brotherhood, compassion and so on.

and the values that, if understood by non-Muslims at large, can go a long way towards battling the Islamophobia, misunderstanding and misrepresentation that Muslims can face. Government and organizations of course have an important role to play in this by encouraging greater education and dialogue, but so, increasingly, does the corporate world. Our definition of Islamic Branding, or branding that succeeds in engaging Muslim consumers, is simply branding that is empathetic to *Shariah* values in all aspects of the brand's identity, behavior and communications. It does not demand that brands observe *Shariah* compliance in every aspect of corporate behavior, which may be naturally unworkable in minority-Muslim markets such as in the US. All it suggests is that a basic level of empathy be reached, keeping the mind-set and values of the *Shariah* in mind, as a way of more effectively reaching the Muslim consumer.

Showing this kind of empathy and partnership could go a long way towards embedding brands into the hearts and minds of the American Muslim community. At their best, American brands can gain their loyalty by demonstrating their willingness to play a part in a distinctly American Muslim narrative that fully integrates American Muslim identity into the public sphere. By doing this, brands may be able to take a leading role in reasserting the promise of American pluralism, at precisely the time when divisive and bitter factionalism seems to have become the unfortunate norm.



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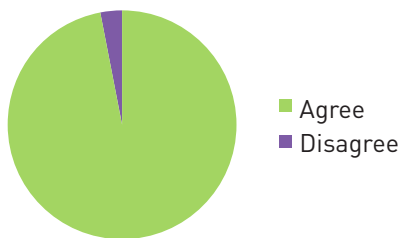
# How brands are seen by American Muslims today

Our research, although small in scale, has given us unique insights into how Muslims in America feel about the way brands and companies are either engaging or failing to engage with their community. Our online survey had a sample size of almost 400 respondents spread across North America. The sample was further split into two wide age groups of 15–35 and 36–65, to roughly correspond with our previous research into the Futurist (younger) and Traditionalist (older) mind-sets among the global Muslim consumer market. Generally, the distinctions between the age groups that we found in other markets held true in the US too, with Futurists appearing more informed and brand-savvy, and more likely to question and demand more from the brands they choose to interact with. We've broken down a few key areas of insight into themes below.

## *Feeling Ignored, yet Wanting to Engage*

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the current climate, a staggering 98% of our respondents believe that American brands don't actively reach out to Muslim consumers. And yet the desire for engagement remains enormous, with 89% saying they wish brands would actively promote and celebrate Muslim identity through such activities as marking religious festivals.

Most American brands **don't actively reach out** to Muslim consumers



I wish more American brands would **engage with Muslim consumers**, e.g., promote and celebrate Muslim festivals

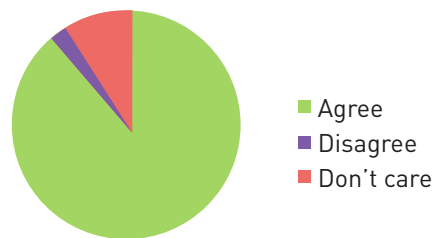


Figure 1. Feeling Ignored, yet Wanting to Engage (source: Ogilvy Noor, American Muslim consumer research, 2010)

## *Faith Is Central to Consumption*

Overall, the centrality of faith to Muslim consumer purchase decisions held true in America just as it had in the rest of the world. Unsurprisingly for the religious group whose faith occupies a more important role in their lives compared with that of other religious groups in America, 97% of all our respondents agreed that being Muslim

affected their consumption behavior, with over half saying that it was a primary factor of consideration in every single purchase decision.

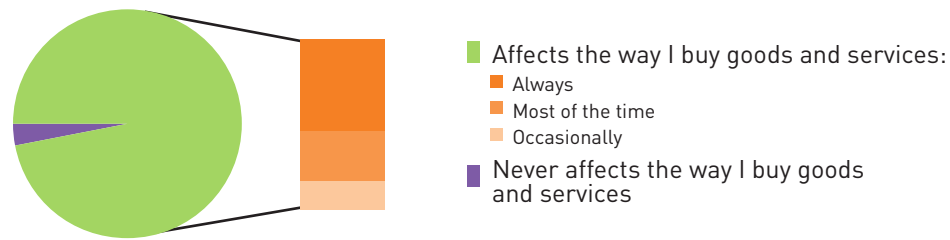


Figure 2. Faith Is Central to Consumption (source: Ogilvy Noor, American Muslim consumer research, 2010)

Yet there is a gaping hole — and this is when it comes to feeling ignored or, worse, misunderstood. The biggest gap felt by American Muslims when it comes to corporate and brand behavior is a feeling that there is a fundamental lack of understanding: almost 90% of our respondents feel that most American brands and businesses today don't understand Muslim values. This confirms one of the starting points we have always recommended at Ogilvy Noor for successful Islamic Branding, i.e., the need for brands to proactively achieve a better understanding of Muslim values by investing in education and training, community involvement and dialogue.

As things stand today, the general lack of brand outreach is no longer going unnoticed. As we've seen, almost as many people — 89% — said they wished American brands would actively engage with Muslim consumers (for example, by promoting and celebrating Muslim festivals) as those who said that American companies are currently not actively reaching out to them. The real shame is that over 80% actually say they would *prefer* to buy brands that reach out to them — and in fact, would go out of their way to do so. With almost 7 million Muslims living in the US who have a combined approximate spending power of over \$170 billion, the potentially missed opportunity for American brands is undeniably enormous.<sup>4</sup>

#### *The Rest of the World Does It Better*

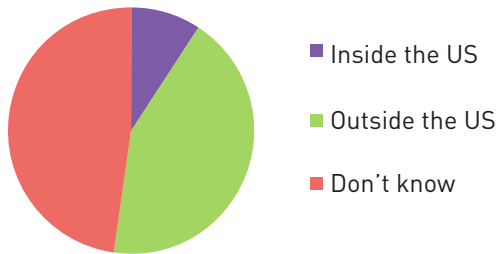
So is anyone getting it right, according to Muslim consumers? A majority (53%) felt that the practice of Islamic Branding, or brands effectively engaging with the Muslim consumer, was much more prevalent and successful outside the US than within it. And while almost 50% of the Traditionalists said that they didn't know enough to judge, the Futurists were much savvier. A clear 63% agreed that brands outside of the US were much more successful at engaging the Muslim consumer, which points to the greater connectedness and more informed nature of this generation.

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<sup>4</sup>According to Zogby International, Muslim advocacy groups put the number of Muslims in the US today at approximately 7 million, although this number is contested due to the exclusion of mandatory religious information in US census data.

The tendency is clear. While in the past American brands and businesses may have been judged solely by behavior that was the norm within America, today there is a greater inclination to view the activities of American companies in light of what the rest of the world is doing. Within the US itself, when asked if there were any brands at all that were getting it right, the overwhelming majority lamented the lack of any progress in this sphere.

Traditionalists: Brands are engaging more effectively with Muslim consumers



Futurists: Brands are engaging more effectively with Muslim consumers

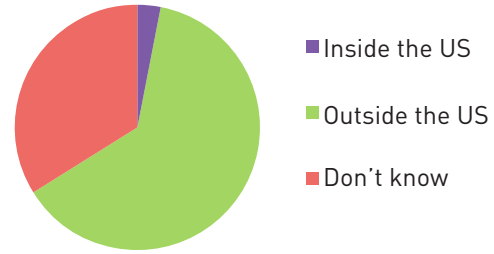


Figure 3. The Rest of the World Does It Better (source: Ogilvy Noor, American Muslim consumer research, 2010)

#### Forgive and Forget Doesn't Come Easy

We've established in our previous research publication that Muslim consumer groups can be some of the most loyal in the world, reluctant to give up their relationship with brands that they feel understand, love and respect them. But the downside of this is also clear — once they feel wronged, Muslim consumers find it extremely difficult to forgive and even harder to forget. The now well-known case of Nike's unintended use on their shoes of an Arabic-like calligraphic inscription that resembled the word "Allah" and prompted a global Muslim boycott is still spontaneously mentioned by consumers 15 years later. These findings, originally from our global Muslim consumer research, have been borne out in America too.

If a brand were to offend or alienate Muslims in any way, I would ...

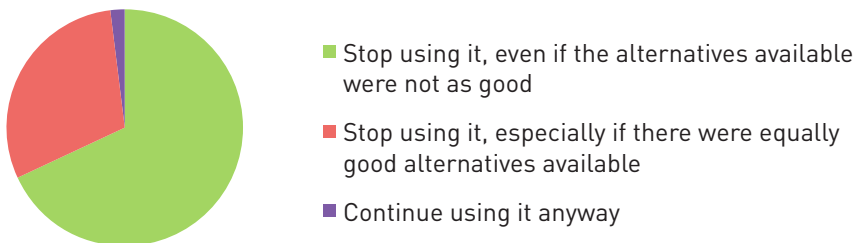


Figure 4. Forgive and Forget Doesn't Come Easy (source: Ogilvy Noor, American Muslim consumer research, 2010)

### *More Than a Simple Apology*

If a brand were to offend or alienate Muslims in the US today, then almost 99% of our respondents would stop using the brand, with a majority of those (65%) saying that they would do so *even if* the available alternatives were not as good. The degree to which Muslim consumers can feel hurt or wronged is not something to be taken lightly, as various backlashes from previous brand gaffes, even those that occur through unfortunate association, have shown in the past. The biggest single loser in the Danish cartoon controversy, Arla Foods, was estimated at the height of the ensuing Muslim consumer boycott of Danish products to be losing \$3.2 million a day; overall, the Danish economy is said to have suffered losses of over \$1.2 billion. When the practice of branding to engage Muslim consumers is being considered, these learnings are very much worth bearing in mind.

Most Muslim Americans agree that for a brand that has wronged or offended Muslims in any way to climb back into favor can be extremely difficult, but it's the criteria used to judge the brand's suitability for reacceptance that are most instructive. According to our research, while over 50% of consumers sought a clear public apology, a much higher 80% felt that they could only buy the brand again "if the company demonstrates a clear understanding of what it did wrong." Apologies alone are not enough anymore. The desire held by American Muslim consumers today is very much for a real knowledge and understanding of Muslim consumer beliefs on the part of the brand, and a clear demonstration of that understanding.

If a brand were to offend Muslims, then I would only buy the brand again if ...

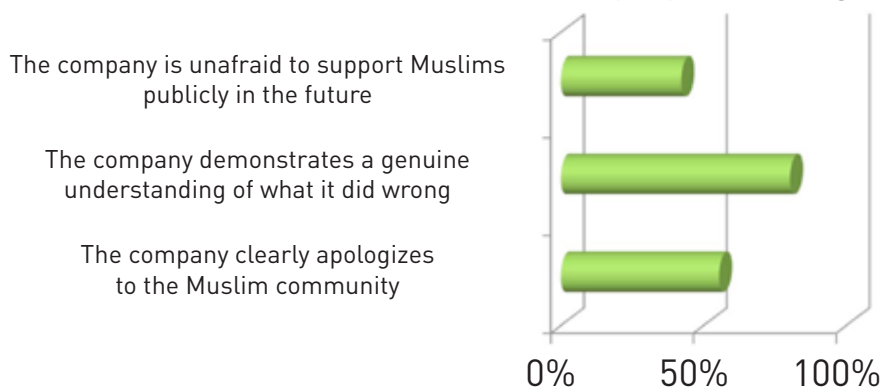


Figure 5. More Than a Simple Apology (source: Ogilvy & Mather, American Muslim consumer research, 2010)

### *My Decision, Your Decision*

The reason it's so important for brands not to ignore the issue of loyalty for Muslim consumers is because of the singular impact of peer influence. Muslim communities tend to be highly collectivist and relationship oriented the world over. In such structures, it is natural to make decisions not for the one but for the many. To always keep an eye out for the good of everyone, not just for oneself, is a much admired Islamic character trait. Add to this the power of word of mouth among younger

consumer groups and the connectedness now afforded by technology and the internet, and it's not hard to see why among young Muslims globally there is a feeling of responsibility to spread the word regarding the actions and sentiments of any known brand, be they positive or negative.

This holds true among the American Muslim consumer community too. Our research reveals that, faced with a brand that has offended or alienated Muslims in some way, 83% would inform their friends and family of what they know or have heard of the brand's behavior, and also of their own decision about whether or not to continue using the brand. Only 17% said that they would make a private decision about that and then keep it to themselves.

If a brand has offended Muslims in any way, then I would probably ...

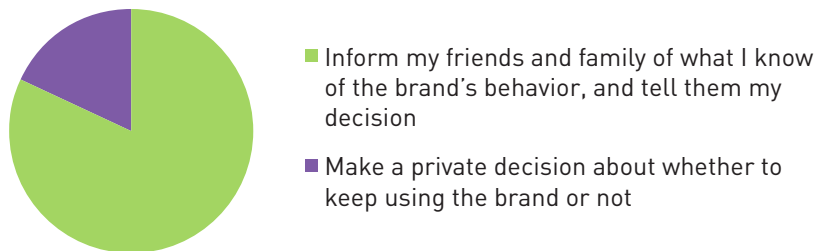


Figure 6. My Decision, Your Decision (source: Ogilvy.Noor, American Muslim consumer research, 2010)

In an atmosphere in which the power of word of mouth is so strong, brands need to be aware of the much wider ecosystem of influence in which they are operating, and begin to see every interaction with the Muslim consumer as an interaction with the Muslim community as a whole.

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# Ways forward for brands: Some recommendations

So what can brands do in light of all this learning? We took the question straight to consumers to gain the most unfiltered perspective possible. We asked them what American brands and companies should do to engage better with them. Here's what we heard.

If American businesses want to effectively engage with Muslim consumers, they need to ...

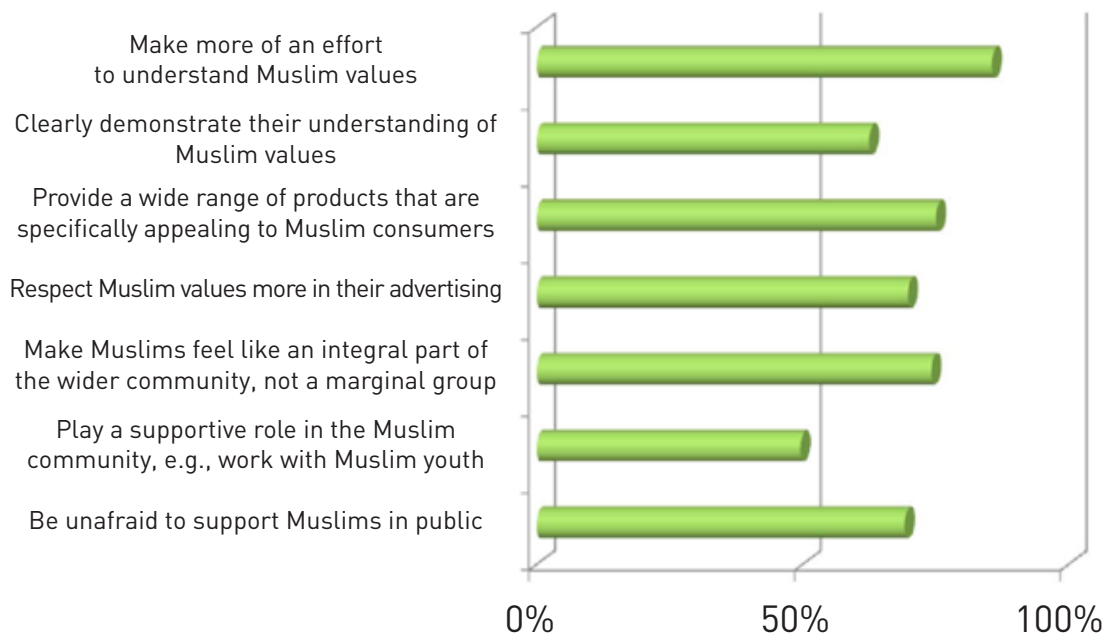


Figure 7. What American Muslim Consumers Want (source: Ogilvy&Noor, American Muslim consumer research, 2010)

We then analyzed these responses based on our previous experience with Muslim consumers globally, and found that they fall into four interlinked but distinctive themes. Each of these themes, we believe, is an area in which American brands would do well to concentrate and up their game. They are: achieving greater understanding of and respect for Muslim values, delivering a more tailored provision of Muslim-friendly products and communications, fostering greater social inclusion and community support, and unashamedly supporting Muslims in public. We'll go into each of these in more detail to understand exactly how brands might cater better to American Muslims.

### *1. Greater Understanding of and Respect for Muslim Values*

The primary recommendation to American brands and companies, by over 85% of the American Muslim consumers we spoke to, was that they “should make more of an effort to understand Muslim values.” They don’t expect companies to get it right straightaway, but they would like to see evidence of at least some effort being made by brands. Understanding and internalizing the values of Islam, which include peacefulness, humility, community and transparency, really is the starting point for connecting with these consumers.

We know that, generally speaking among Muslims, a consistent theme that has appeared in surveys like the Gallup polls is their desire for the West to respect Islam. The Muslim West Facts Project in 2009 found that American Muslims were less likely than Americans in other religious groups to report feeling respected. When it comes to the American Muslim relationship with brands and companies, things are no different. A majority (57%) of our respondents feel that American companies don’t respect the values and needs of the Muslim consumer.

This is a clear opportunity for brands to undertake significant informational activities to educate both their staff and their consumers on Islamic values that must be understood in order to underpin a mutually respectful relationship.

A further 63% of our respondents felt it was equally important for brands to then go on to clearly demonstrate that understanding of their values in their own behavior and communications. For example, American Muslim consumers would also like to see “more sensitivity to Muslim values demonstrated in advertising,” with 70% of our respondents recommending this to American brands. Ogilvy Noor has a knowledge bank of successful communication approaches to Muslim consumers. Because this knowledge was gathered through decades of experience in Muslim markets as well as through our more recent global Muslim research, Ogilvy Noor is able to point to a few key do’s and don’ts in this sphere.

Generally, advertising that emphasizes collective and family values over selfish individualism, long-term benefits and investment over short-term wins, investment in children and the future, respect for the family structure, modesty and humility, light-hearted humor that doesn’t come at the cost of cruelty to others, and forward-facing innovation all strike a positive chord with Muslim consumers. Tailored communications around the holy month of Ramadan and the two *Eid* festivals are also highly appreciated. This is a well-known given in majority-Muslim markets — indeed, the Ramadan marketing period in the Middle East is often likened to Super Bowl activities in the US. Yet in America, the reality is that it is harder to celebrate Muslim festivals publicly without being seen as taking sides. However, as we shall go on to see, the benefits of undertaking this kind of engagement far outweigh the costs. MoneyGram, the worldwide money transfer service, recently ran a Ramadan promotion in the US around the theme of Ramadan kindness, enrolling participants in a prize drawing and encouraging them to share

stories of kindness with each other online. The activity created significant buzz online among Muslim consumers, who responded with enthusiasm and gratitude that their values were being tapped in such a relevant manner at such a relevant time, Ramadan being the month of charitable deeds and good behavior, over and above the ritual of fasting.

## 2. *Catering to Muslim Needs through Tailored Provision*

A second key area in which companies were felt to be able to deliver much more is in their catering to Muslim consumer needs through actual product provision. Including cultural members of the faith, the US Census Bureau reported that there were an estimated 6 million American Jews in 2008. Zogby International estimated the number of Muslims to range up to 7 million in that same year.<sup>5</sup> And yet, according to Muxlim, the online Muslim lifestyle network, for every *halal* product in the US there are 800 kosher products on sale (many of which are enthusiastically consumed by Muslim consumers as the closest thing to *halal* they can find). So it's hardly surprising that 75% of our respondents wished companies would provide a wider range of products that specifically appeal to the Muslim consumer.

Understanding the Muslim consumer's product needs requires a detailed understanding of *halal*, not only in practice but also in philosophy. *Halal* is, by definition, all that is actively recommended for consumption within Islam. It is a holistic set of practices that encourage the natural purity of the product and process of manufacture, the humane and ethical treatment of animals, the responsible treatment of the environment and a socially beneficial system for workers, employees, etc. Specific instructions exist with regard to the preparation and permissibility of certain foods and substances within this definition. Animals must be treated humanely and slaughtered in a prescribed manner to minimize the pain felt upon death — likewise, no by-product of animals raised unnaturally or treated with cruelty can be consumed, according to the definition of *halal*. Alcohol, pork and gambling are all defined as *haram* in Islam, or that which is forbidden to Muslims. As a result, any by-product of these substances or practices — anything from, for example, animal fat-based gelatin to speculative spread-betting on financial markets or lottery scratch cards — may be considered to be in conflict with Muslim values.

Brands that are committed to catering to Muslim needs must therefore pay special heed to proscriptions such as these, preferably through consultation with senior Muslim scholars or clerics. Companies may be very easily able to offer Muslim-friendly versions of their current products with just a few minimal, informed changes to their production or ingredient-sourcing processes. Such easy wins should not be dismissed when one considers the deep loyalty they could engender among a large and lucrative new consumer segment. Walmart, in a now well-known move in

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<sup>5</sup>According to Muslim advocacy groups. Accurate estimates of the number of Muslims in America are hard to come by and are constantly debated because religious affiliation is not mandatory on the U.S. Census.



2008, decided to branch into catering specifically to the Muslim consumer needs of the Arab American community in Dearborn, Michigan, on the back of specialist research it undertook into the group's consumption behavior. Small but significant changes were then rolled out across its Dearborn superstore — the pork products section was de-emphasized, specially trained staff were hired who could speak Arabic if necessary, and a special *halal* meat section was introduced. The response among the local Middle Eastern American community was overwhelmingly positive, and the case was mentioned regularly in our research as one of the handful of examples of a large national retailer seeking to meet Muslim needs.

The close affinity of *halal* with current free-range and organic offerings in the Western world is also worth noting. American Muslim consumers have demonstrated a preference for these products for some time now, and brands such as Tom's of Maine and Whole Foods, which proclaim their *halal* credentials wherever possible, have stood to gain enormously. Whole Foods in particular, by encouraging more organic farming and organic consumption among Muslims, has equated *halal* with its own well-known corporate ethos of environmental responsibility and social-friendliness to the consumer at large. This may be seen as being indirectly very beneficial to the promotion of the *halal* "brand" among American consumers in the long term. Tom's of Maine could be said to be a company that already operates along *Shariah*-friendly lines in all aspects of its operations and, most significantly, is unashamed to support Muslim needs in the process by ensuring that all its products are 100% *halal*. (The two products that failed to meet this certification are very actively communicated as non-*halal* for the Muslim consumer's benefit). These examples would point to an opening, perhaps even a missed opportunity, for existing organic or environmentally friendly brands and products to adopt some kind of Muslim-friendly messaging, or even simply obtain *halal* status, in order to tap into what appears to be a very receptive market. In our global research, The Body Shop was mentioned spontaneously a number of times as a Muslim-friendly brand precisely for its ethical and environmentally friendly credentials.

As the roaring sales of kosher products to American Muslims go to show, these consumers care less about the religious origin of the product than about the sincerity of the manufacturer's intention in providing a product that is pure and healthy and meets all the criteria necessary for Muslim consumption. Indeed, the Cabot Creamery cooperative has tapped into this insight by making its already 100% kosher product range compatible with *halal* standards wherever possible — with the result that many American Muslim consumers now recall Cabot as a *halal* brand that caters to their needs.

The need now is for brands to show that *halal* is something they understand on a holistic level. We've seen in our global Muslim research that slapping a *halal* sticker on a product is not sufficient anymore, as consumers want to see more information and understand what is backing up the claim. The same is sure to be the case in the US soon, as consumers crave an entirely new level of transparency to be reassured

of a brand's intentions. Purity and sincerity of intention have always been central in Islam, and manufacturers able to demonstrate these values in their transparent and informed provision of tailored goods and services to the Muslim consumer — proving that they have their best interests at heart — will have a winning strategy.

### 3. *Social Inclusion and Community Support*

The issue of inclusion is unsurprisingly much more top-of-mind in a minority-Muslim market like the US compared with a majority-Muslim market such as, say, Pakistan.

American Muslims want to be seen and heard as Muslims, it is true, but not at the expense of being seen as true Americans. Too often this has become a compromise: the label of Islam often automatically casts a shadow of doubt and suspicion on Muslims over their potentially un-American values. The challenge is, as mentioned earlier, to champion those areas in which Muslim and American values are exactly the same, and those many other areas in which they are remarkably similar. From our respondents' answers to our open-ended questions, we felt a deep and growing need to assert the place of "Muslim America" in the fabric of modern America. Furthermore, they expressed a strong belief that the business world, and not just government and social institutions, has a part to play in making this happen. A full 75% of our consumers felt that it was important for American companies to "actively make Muslims feel like part of the wider community, not a marginal group." Another 50% wish that brands would play a more supportive role in the development and strengthening of Muslim communities — working with Muslim youth, for example. One of the great agreed-upon challenges facing the American Muslim community is inclusion at all levels of society, whether at the local, state or federal level, and whether in business, education or community. Brands and companies can have an important role to play in fostering this inclusion, thereby helping to answer a need that is keenly felt by Muslim America today.

Inclusivity for Muslim consumers goes hand in hand with community spirit. Community is one of the key *Shariah* values and matters enormously to the Muslim consumer. One of the five pillars of Islam is *zakaat*, or the regular giving of a set portion of one's earnings to the poor. The true definition of *zakaat*, however, like that of *halal*, is much wider, and encompasses a set of values based in always looking out for those less privileged than oneself and actively seeking to make contributions to the wider community. The great loyalty that Muslim consumers display for their chosen brands has the effect of treating them as part of their trusted and loved inner circle. A result of this is that they are then held to the same behavioral standards as their own friends and family, and this includes a commitment to community. Any action on the part of the American brand to support the American Muslim community at a time of need or just generally, such as the small but significant gesture by Western Union to waive transfer fees for donations to recently flood-stricken Pakistan, goes a long way towards reassuring Muslims that they are valued as an integral part of the brand's consumer base, and that their needs are taken into special consideration as though they are part of the same community. Tom's of Maine is

known and held in high esteem among the Muslim American community for always donating 10% of its pretax profits to charity and encouraging a strong culture of community volunteering among its employees. Indeed, how employees are treated forms a strong part of the story of community support — the hiring of Muslim staff who are allowed to practice their religion freely in the workplace, and a reputation for encouraging interfaith respect among a diverse workforce — are all things that the American Muslim consumer will look for when they seek to know the story behind a brand. Workplaces that allow adequate prayer facilities, such as certain branches of Popeyes, or those that encourage the choice to wear religious headgear, such as IKEA, are examples we heard of in our research.

Other ways for brands to demonstrate this kind of inclusivity and community support include being unafraid to learn and educate regarding *halal* and support the beliefs underpinning it, consulting closely with Muslim community figures to cater better to their needs (as Walmart did in Dearborn), working with Muslim communities to ensure they get a fair deal (as Walmart, again, did by agreeing not to undercut local family-run stores and to be scrutinized in the process), by celebrating Muslim festivals wholeheartedly, and by supporting and being endorsed by prominent Muslim celebrities, sports and cultural figures. American Muslims crave openness and tolerance in the practice of their faith, and any steps that brands can take to incorporate their preferences as a natural part of brand offerings, while respecting their community-based needs, are likely to elicit a deep and lasting loyalty from them as consumers.

#### *4. Unwavering Public Support of Muslims*

The support of the kind mentioned above must also, once given, be expressed publicly. In the face of an atmosphere that can often border on shame, secrecy and seclusion, 70% of our respondents feel that American companies need to be unafraid to support Muslims in public. The case of Best Buy, which is by now well known, was mentioned spontaneously — more than any other brand in our research — as an example of a company that went out of its way to reach out to the American Muslim community, but importantly also dared to stick to its guns in the face of an eventual public outcry regarding its Muslim-friendly stance. During a recent Ramadan that happened to coincide with Thanksgiving, Best Buy issued promotional material that wished customers both a happy Thanksgiving and a happy *Eid al-Adha* (one of the two major religious festivals in the Muslim calendar). Public outcry ensued regarding Best Buy's supposed siding with Muslims, yet the company issued a public statement that read simply, "Best Buy's customers and employees around the world represent a variety of faiths and denominations. We respect that diversity and choose to greet our customers and employees in ways that reflect their traditions," and refused to comment further. Despite threats of a boycott, Best Buy sales were actually reported to have increased by 13% compared to the same period the year before.

Likewise, the US Postal Service this year issued holiday stamps with the message *Eid Mubarak* (*Eid* blessings) to mark its respect for religious diversity. When

this act invited irate email allegations about supporting terrorism, the USPS simply responded by reminding consumers that the stamp formed a natural part of its well-known holiday series, which had been issued for many years. Six Flags, the theme parks, has also stood by its decision to continue hosting a National Muslim Family Day, an event of celebration and togetherness, despite wide-ranging criticisms from various pressure groups. These sorts of decisions, which seem to Muslim consumers to represent the brand's standing for larger, longer-term ideals over and above simple short-term profiteering, strike a real chord with communities who have Islamic values at heart.

As one of our young Muslim employees at Ogilvy & Mather New York, Samar Taher, so succinctly put it, "If a brand is willing to go out there and support the Muslim consumer, the Muslim consumer is willing to go out there and support the brand."

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# Concluding thoughts

By and large, the consumers we spoke to were of the opinion that their specific needs were only really being provided for by small specialty brands — many mentioned the *halal* provider Crescent Foods as an example of best practice. In the face of such a large appetite for tailored products and communications, however, the opportunity for mainstream American brands to get significantly involved is enormous. There is certainly a great deal left to do in this space, as we've shown. But we have noticed some tentative steps being taken by mainstream American brands already — steps which have gone some way towards garnering American Muslim consumer loyalty. Below, we explore a few of these cases more fully in order to see how they are catering to Muslim needs and what we might learn from these early experiences.

Our explorations so far have only served to confirm for us that this arena remains an enormous, untapped opportunity for brands in America, and that, equipped with the right levels of understanding and the right guidance, success for American brands with the American Muslim consumer cannot be far off. American Muslim consumers, like any other consumer group in the world, crave brands that respect their values and understand where they're coming from, talk to them on equal terms and, perhaps more than anything else, include them by giving them a proud and legitimate part to play in the distinctly multicultural story of America.

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# Appendix I: Case studies

## Walmart

### *What have they done?*

In 2008, Walmart, America's biggest grocery retailer, opened a supercenter in Dearborn, Michigan, carrying products that specifically appeal to the Middle Eastern and Muslim communities. For two years prior to opening the store, Walmart conducted extensive research among the Muslim consumer community in the area to discover their needs. The result is a store that genuinely reflects its majority user base and is a shining example of what Muslim consumers would like to see more of.

**PRODUCT & SERVICE.** The Walmart Dearborn store offers a newly opened *halal* meat section, a less prominent pork products section, and a range of specifically sourced fresh, frozen and prepackaged goods that are commonly used in Middle Eastern dishes popular among the local Arab American community. Over and above the catering of specific products, Walmart hired 35 employees who could speak Arabic and delivered a program of ethnic-sensitivity training to its entire staff of 650 employees.

**COMMUNITY.** Walmart then went further and made an extraordinary promise — to not undercut the prices of small local merchants. To ensure it delivered on its promise, the company agreed to be scrutinized by a “community advisory board” made up of local Arab American leaders to ensure it was delivering in harmony with local mom-and-pop stores.

### *What can we learn from American Muslim consumer reactions?*

Walmart's proactive delivery of products and services to suit the needs of its Muslim community base in Dearborn has won it many supporters. The example of the store was mentioned, unprompted, by a significant number of respondents, most of whom agreed that this was the kind of activity they crave more of, but nationwide. Particularly notable are the ways in which the company based its decisions on consultations through local research and ongoing community involvement. Especially significant is the way the brand has understood and internalized the way to success with the Muslim consumer, by playing a respected role in their community — embodying respect, sincerity of intention and a genuine desire to engage on their terms.

# Best Buy

## *What have they done?*

Best Buy, one of America's leading consumer electronics retailers, is by now well recognized as one of the few American brands that has actively sought to reach out to the American Muslim community in its messaging.

**INCLUSIVITY.** In 2010, Thanksgiving coincided with *Eid al-Adha*, one of the major Muslim religious festivals. With the best of intentions, Best Buy released promotional and marketing materials that wished its customers both a happy Thanksgiving and a happy *Eid*. Almost immediately, message boards, blogs and online forums were flooded with howls of outrage from conservative and Christian groups, who were furious that the two occasions be equated or that a Muslim festival be mentioned at all.

**PUBLIC SUPPORT.** Best Buy, however, refused to discuss the matter and stood stalwartly by its decision. In a brief press statement, Best Buy's representative clearly set out the brand's intention behind the greeting. "Best Buy's customers and employees around the world represent a variety of faiths and denominations," she said. "We respect that diversity and choose to greet our customers and employees in ways that reflect their traditions." This statement made clear that the brand's decision was a deliberate and thought-through choice and one which they were clearly prepared to defend if necessary.

## *What can we learn from American Muslim consumer reactions?*

Both the initial message and the ensuing clamor around it have come to constitute what most would agree is a major milestone in marketing to the Muslim consumer. For the first time, American Muslims felt publicly reached out to by a major national brand. The goodwill this has generated was captured on numerous blogs and summarized in a public letter to Best Buy from the organizers of the American Muslim Consumer Conference, thanking the brand for its recognition and support of Muslim consumers and also, significantly, for standing by its decision.

Best Buy's decision to hold firm and continue to educate regarding the sincerity of its intentions rather than bow to pressure can be said to be the move that has won the brand sincere Muslim loyalty. More consumers mentioned the brand spontaneously in our research than any other brand, and they said they felt it was a brand they could count on to support them. The company is estimated to have experienced a 13% rise in revenue compared with the previous December. It is also significant that, through this experience, the brand has attracted liberal supporters from many corners of American society who, along with the Muslim community, celebrate the fact that a leading corporate voice is upholding the promise of America's cultural pluralism and tolerance in a way that has not happened previously.

# Whole Foods

*What have they done?*

Whole Foods, the world's largest retailer of natural and organic foods, is famously known for its promise of high-quality, minimally processed, nutritious and responsibly sourced products. All products are unadulterated by artificial additives, sweeteners, colorings and preservatives. The company is also committed to promoting organic farming and sustainable agriculture. All of this points to a very natural synergy between the ethos of Whole Foods and the ethos underpinning *halal*.

**PRODUCT.** In August 2010, just in time for Ramadan, Whole Foods made the decision to increase its product range with the inclusion of the Saffron Road line of prepackaged *halal* foods. Saffron Road, a division of American Halal, is an entrepreneurial venture whose mission is to offer all-natural *halal*-certified foods that are holistically and sustainably farmed, aiming to set the standard for premium quality in *halal*. The partnership works well on both fronts — it allows Whole Foods an entry point to a new consumer base through targeted offerings, while Muslim consumers are allowed greater national access to *halal* products of the highest quality.

**PERCEPTION.** Whole Foods' decision to introduce Saffron Road also explicitly confirms the natural overlap that exists between *halal* and organic, sustainable, environmentally friendly practices, which will in turn serve to broaden public acceptance of *halal* in the longer term.

*What can we learn from American Muslim consumer reactions?*

American Muslim consumers in our research referred to Whole Foods as one of the few national retailers taking genuine steps towards the provision of goods and services to meet Muslim needs. Whole Foods notes that its sales of ethnic foods have grown in the range of 20% while overall food sales have remained relatively flat in the last few months of 2010. Its move to offer Saffron Road products has been welcomed by the Muslim community, but it also points towards the need for more mass-market inclusion of *halal* at the national retail level in the near future. In vision and outlook, Whole Foods can be said to have always been an implicitly *Shariah*-friendly company — putting the welfare of the environment and the community first. These are credentials that would attract American Muslim consumers anyway; the provision of tailored products simply serves to solidify the perception in consumers' minds that it is indeed a Muslim-friendly brand.



# Tom's of Maine

## *What have they done?*

Tom's of Maine is one of America's leading producers of natural personal care items, delivering socially and environmentally friendly natural products to consumers for over forty years.

**PRODUCT.** Everything that they produce is artificial-ingredient free, not tested on animals, and mostly vegan. Except for a single product, everything they produce and sell is kosher. And in 2006 Tom's of Maine received *halal* certification for almost 100% of their products, with only two products excepted. All their products also have approval from the ADA, PETA and CCIC, so they set superior quality standards to boot.

**BUSINESS PRACTICE.** The Tom's of Maine ethos encourages both its employees and consumers to bring about broad positive change, socially and environmentally. They invest in clean energy, use recycled and recyclable packaging, take a stance against animal testing, donate significantly to charity and encourage employees to spend 5% of their paid time volunteering. The company is also known to take up causes about which it feels passionate, often partnering with vendors and community organizations to support their ideals. Tom's of Maine is also passionate about transparency, going out of their way to deliver information to consumers about every single aspect of product sourcing, manufacture and business process that it possibly can.

## *What can we learn from American Muslim consumer reactions?*

By making the proactive decision to have all their products certified *halal* in 2006, Tom's of Maine can be said to be one of the leaders in recognizing the needs of the American Muslim community. The brand already embodies a very *Shariah*-friendly ethos, putting the community first in everything they do and taking personal responsibility for positive social change. The sincerity of intention behind their actions strikes a real chord with Muslim consumers, as does their commitment to honesty and transparency, both key values of the *Shariah*. What they cannot certify as *halal*, they make clearly known to Muslim consumers, ensuring that they do not unwittingly compromise anyone. In all aspects of the company's attitude and behavior, they represent a Muslim-friendly brand, and one that proves that profit and principle can, and increasingly must, go hand in hand.

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# Appendix 2: Key statistics\*

97% of American Muslim consumers surveyed agreed that being Muslim affected their consumption behavior, with over half saying that it was a primary factor of consideration in every single purchase decision.

86% believe that American companies need to make more of an effort to understand Muslim values.

98% feel that American brands don't actively reach out to Muslim consumers.

57% feel American companies don't respect the values and needs of the Muslim consumer.

Over 80% say that they would prefer to buy brands that support Muslim identity, for example, through promotion and celebration of religious festivals.

53% feel that the practice of Islamic Branding — brands effectively engaging with the Muslim consumer — is much more prevalent and successful outside the US than within.

Almost 99% of consumers said that they would stop using a brand that has offended Muslims, and 65% would do so *even if* the available alternatives were not as good.

83% feel it is their responsibility to inform all their friends and family of what they know of the brand's behavior and sentiments.

75% wish that companies would provide a wider range of products with specific appeal to the Muslim consumer.

70% of American Muslim consumers would also like to see more sensitivity to Muslim values demonstrated in advertising.

50% wish that brands would play a more supportive role in the development and strengthening of Muslim communities.

Almost 75% of American Muslim consumers want brands to make Muslims feel like an integral part of the wider community, not a marginal group.

70% want American companies to be unafraid to support Muslims in public.

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\* These statistics derive directly from Ogilvy Noor's exploratory online research into American Muslim consumers in September 2010 and refer only to those consumers researched.

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