

# We are moving from a world of brand loyalty to one of loyal brands

In 2019, when **Elena Gerstmann** returned home from a business trip, she faced a dilemma. Wanting to grab a snack along the way, the only option available at the airport was a restaurant that she had ruled out for years due to its anti-LGBTQ+ financial support. Fast forward to 2022, and her wife **Beth Surmont** attended a conference in an American state that had recently passed an anti-LGBTQ+ policy. Both questioned whether they should boycott both the restaurant and the conference, until it struck them: wouldn't it be better to create a platform that would help delegates donate their money to offset expenses that went against their core values?

Thus, **SocialOffset** was born, a non-profit organisation providing a socially conscious alternative to boycotting events and destinations, enabling individuals to align their values by donating to local charities.



## Should delegates be at the centre of an association's social decisions?

They have to be considered. One of the things we have to do as organisations, from SocialOffset's perspective, is validate people's feelings. We've moved from a world where we talked about brand loyalty to one where people expect loyal brands. What does this mean for associations? Well, I think it's impossible to thread the needle, to get it perfectly right, but as companies or non-profit organisations, we have to be aware of what's going on. We can't stick our heads in the sand and hope that nothing happens. It's important to listen to what our delegates have to say, and how they align in terms of values, so that we can communicate socially and make decisions based on loyalty and connections to our organisations' core value. However, it's almost impossible to make decisions based on what all your constituents want, so whatever you decide, you're not going to make everyone happy.

## What social impact priorities do associations in the United States expect from you?

Our first inclination was towards LGBTQ+ rights, reproductive rights, and racial injustice. As we developed our minimum viable product by talking to locals and

participants, we added hunger, housing insecurity and environmental concerns. These were chosen to ensure that we had a range of causes that people could align and identify with. Another reason is that they are universal. When we travel to face-to-face events, we know that, far too often, this has an environmental impact. We also know that on the way to a hotel, we come across hungry and housing insecure people. And then, when we enter a convention centre, we notice the enormous food waste left between sessions. It's in our faces! It's true that participants and exhibitors go to an event to advance science, culture, and the mission of the organisation hosting it. We're finding cures for diseases at our conferences and innovations at various levels. That's why face-to-face is so important. But as participants, what are we doing to make the world a better place? Through our vetting process, it is with local charities that SocialOffset makes its impact. Locals who know the problems and are putting up what we call "the good fight" are the best ambassadors to help leave the place better than we found it.



**Do you think that the event of the future will be inseparable from the social impact it will leave on a place? Can a well-structured event survive without causes?**

(Silence) I don't know. If you think about society, the environment and bringing people together, we're operating in a very complex world. My background is in social psychology, which has to do with connecting people, groups and networking. When you put two budding scientists, doctors or engineers in a room interacting about something that could spark a 40-year collaboration, that can make a real difference and change the world. Can it happen virtually? Yes, but it certainly won't have the same level of impact and complexity. What we have today is the desire to call it out. Maybe 50 years ago, we might have had a room full of men because women had left the industry due to sexual harassment. Just because we didn't talk about it doesn't mean it didn't exist.

Then, when we talk about the accessibility of people who are unable to travel due to disabilities, whether it's a physical, social, or economic limitation, we have to address that as an industry. We still haven't found the right business model to include these delegates. As it is, we deal with business models that depend on physical space but also on virtual networks, since for many non-profit organisations their bottom line depends on their conferences.

**How do you interpret the duality between impact and influence and what is legacy for you from the perspective of a social advocate?**

I think about impact, influence, and then intent. And I think that intention is sometimes forgotten, both by companies and organisations, but also when it comes to people. So, how do they apply what they think is right to make an impact? Especially those in power and who start from a position of privilege. If we talk about myself, I'm a white, educated, upper-middle-class person with influence. How do I use that to make a difference? Nevertheless, in other spaces or contexts, I'm not a person with great power. I'm a lesbian of Jewish descent who grew up under social services in my early years. From this point of view, on most days, everyone comes in and out of privilege and influence. How do we use that to become better people? Beth and I created SocialOffset as a way to make a difference in the world. I see the world more through social justice, while Beth sees it in terms of meetings and the way people hold face-to-face events.

**In your opinion, was the pandemic the spark that set off this social dialogue or, on the contrary, do you see associations returning to the old business-as-usual frame?**

I think the conference space has improved because of the pandemic. It shook us up at a time when we were dealing with Black Lives Matter, the anti-racism movement and other social phenomena that were happening in the world. It forced us to stop doing things the way we had always done. I know many associations that are rethinking their objectives, target audiences, learning methods, venues and event duration. At the same time, some of the problems we face haven't really changed. I hope we're moving forward and making progress every day in terms of teaching and learning. As they say, you never step in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and you are not the same as well. So, I think COVID has definitely changed some things.

**Do you think the associations you have worked with have a clear picture of what they want to achieve at this level?**

I think it means something to some associations, while others persist in ignoring it. Those say that they have other priorities, that all they care about is the 'green pen,' the business side of it. On the other hand, we see other associations who understand these social aspects but who tell us: "We'll carry on doing things the way we're doing because it's worked for us so far." Then there are the associations that try to live up to a purpose. They have values even if there are ranges within those values. We know, for example, that there are some association Boards in the US that only use these criteria once they have chosen their location.

We also know that there are some associations that aren't talking publicly about the issue, but are promoting silent boycotts by rejecting certain locations. Finally, there are some who also tell us that they prefer to go virtual because of this social confusion. The danger for me, because I value face-to-face, is that these organisations simply throw up their hands and give up on setting good examples. I think clarity looks like organisations selecting the right mode of delivery that aligns with their mission and objectives, validating their attendees' value, and working with SocialOffset (yes, I'm biased) to make the world a better place - one event at a time.



*As we're talking now on screen, I feel connected to you, but would I feel more connected if we were in person? I'd say yes.*

