As Americans protested police brutality and the killing of George Floyd over the past week, they were met with tear gas and law-enforcement batons. The whole ghastly spectacle—eyesight lost to rubber bullets, people beaten and sometimes killed in the streets, journalists arrested on television—was broadcast live on platforms like Twitter and Instagram.

Behind the scenes, brand managers were worked quickly to create sensitive, aesthetically pleasing responses to the protests. Nike, a company more practiced than most at associating itself with social movements, was among the first brands to pivot its messaging. On Friday, Nike posted a text video in black and white, tracked to somber piano music, on its social-media accounts. “For once, don't do it,” the minute-long video implores, invoking the brand's famous “Just do it” slogan. In the next frame, the command gets only slightly more specific: “Don't pretend there’s not a problem in
America.” Eventually, the “problem” is named as racism. Black Americans and police brutality are never mentioned directly.

In the following days, hundreds of companies, sports teams, and celebrities followed suit with posts of their own, many of them nearly identical in their vague phrasing and awkward execution. Facebook and Citibank weighed in, as did the gay dating app Grindr and even the cartoon cat Garfield.

[Read: Brands are not our friends]

This template that brands use to respond to a national crisis has become standard in recent years, as people experience collective trauma on the internet in real time. Images of police violence, school shootings, or racist attacks appear on the same social-media platforms where companies sell mascaras or sneakers or delivery services, often side by side. Contemporary marketing theory implores brands to show up where people naturally congregate online and engage with the topics they care about. That means riding the wave of memes and random topics that sustain social-media chatter, posting in the same formats as everyone else, often acting more like a friend than a company—even in times of tragedy.

But it has never been clearer than right now that brands aren’t your friend, when social media is awash in videos of riots and humans being assaulted, in the middle of a global pandemic, all while the president of the United States threatens to unleash the country’s military on its own populace. American brands have rushed to show where they stand, but it’s still uncertain what they intend to offer—what they can offer—beyond greater awareness of their existence and a vague sense of virtue.

Historically, companies hoping to sell you cleaning products or sweatpants didn’t feel the need to share their thoughts on racism, disaster, and national tragedy. Wading into divisive topics was considered needlessly risky—as Michael Jordan once joked about his own reticence to comment on politics, “Republicans buy sneakers, too.” That apolitical approach changed as social media took off and marketing molded to it.

Conventional advertising just isn’t that effective online, where people quickly learn to tune it out, use simple programs to block it, or sign up for paid services where they avoid ads entirely. That encourages a different kind of ad: one that social-media users want to share themselves, often because it appeals to their ideals or beliefs. The earliest proof that this tactic could be remunerative was the monstrously successful Dove Campaign for Real Beauty, which started in 2004. Over the next decade and a half, the company chided those who buy into beauty standards, set up self-esteem workshops and antidiscrimination campaigns, and made billions selling body wash and deodorant.

[Read: The risky business of branding black pain]
In the years after Dove’s success, market research began to support the concept its campaign had proved: People, and especially those under 40, want brands to be responsible to their customers and sensitive to the conditions of life in America. What that means in practice, though, is less clear. Instead of taking concrete actions, many companies interpret consumers’ push for social responsibility as a strong desire for them to make vague statements about even vaguer values, such as “equality” and “community,” when something racist dominates the news. Sometimes, these gestures include donations to well-funded and well-known nonprofit organizations, or an indeterminate promise to make such a donation, in some amount, to some kind of charity that is “doing the work.”

Even with the risk of alienating some existing customers or the cost of a donation that will impress people, the reward for sticking with the right cause can be high: Many of the posts are shared and discussed far more widely than those about actual products or services, and they allow brands to associate themselves with the zeitgeist in a fast, low-effort way during periods when their typical advertising efforts might need to be paused.

As more and more companies follow Dove’s lead and jump on the bandwagon of social consciousness, it creates a sort of peer pressure. On top of the incentive of attention, companies feel the need to weigh in so that they don’t come across as apathetic. At the same time, they know how fraught strong political statements can be. That’s when you get language so bland, it borders on inanity—the blight of “inequality of all kinds” and the need for “meaningful change.” Companies who have no business associating themselves with anti-racism movements are trying to say the right thing without upsetting anyone, walking right up to the line of politics without stepping one toe over it.

In the case of the recent protests, which come at a confluence of tragedies, it’s not clear that such vague paeansto progress will do the trick. A new survey conducted by the data company Morning Consult found that most people want companies to commit resources to help communities recover from unrest and make their own workplaces less racist. Messages expressing support on social media were the least likely to satisfy respondents.

What the companies that play this game don’t seem to be contemplating—and often obscure—is that their businesses frequently don’t pay back nearly as much as they gain from their associations with black Americans. Nike owes much of its success not just to the mostly black athletes who lend their name to shoe lines and their face to ad campaigns, but to black Americans in general, who made sneakers and sportswear trendy parts of the country’s casual wardrobe. To its credit, Nike is more active than
most brands in its creation and participation in charitable programs, many of which benefit nonwhite kids who want to play sports. But Nike’s senior-leadership structure—the primary internal beneficiaries of the company’s enormous profits—is overwhelmingly white. According to the company’s internal data, about 10 percent of its vice presidents were black in 2019, and another 11 percent came from other underrepresented groups, which the brand says represents a 2 percent increase over the previous year. When asked to comment, a Nike spokesperson provided a statement that read, in part, “We continue to sharpen our focus on hiring more black leaders across all levels at the company.”

Twitter, a website whose most beloved members are unpaid black creators writing jokes and making memes that undergird the whole platform’s culture, added the #blacklivesmatter hashtag to its official Twitter bio. The company, which didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment, has been notoriously resistant to years of pleas to remove the accounts of virulent neo-Nazis, but has recently shown a willingness to respond to political leaders glorifying violence by hiding their tweets behind warning labels, including one from President Donald Trump.

Other companies that released statements on social media have more directly reaped the spoils of racism. Amazon, which provides data and video surveillance to law-enforcement agencies, released a statement saying, in part, that the company stood in solidarity “in the fight against systemic racism and injustice.” Nextdoor, a neighborhood-watch app with a reputation as a place for local busybodies to conduct group surveillance of their black neighbors, tweeted that “black lives matter.” Reddit, long a hub for racist organizing and coordinated harassment of black people online, posted a long letter from its CEO, Steve Huffman, that encouraged listening and empathy. His heart, he said, was heavy. In 2018, Huffman made explicit that racists were welcome to share their beliefs on his platform. He backtracked a day later, saying racism was allowed but not exactly welcomed.

(Amazon did not return requests for comment, and Reddit declined the request. A spokesperson for Nextdoor provided a statement that read, in part, “We explicitly prohibit racial profiling and take this issue extraordinarily seriously. We overhauled our safety post flow to help educate members around bias and force people to slow down and think before they post,” which the company says has reduced those posts by 75 percent.)

Still others have sought to align themselves with anti-racism while actively quelling dissent against racial injustice. In 2017, the makeup conglomerate L’Oréal terminated its endorsement contract with the model Munroe Bergdorf, a black trans woman, after she spoke out on Facebook against racism following the white-supremacist rally in
Charlottesville, Virginia. At the time, L’Oréal justified the move by saying that the company “supports diversity and tolerance towards all people irrespective of their race, background, gender and religion,” and that Bergdorf’s comments on white racism were at odds with those values. Yesterday, L’Oréal’s U.S. division tweeted a graphic that read “Speaking out is worth it,” along with a caption decrying “injustice of all kinds.”

The NFL might be the most visibly anti-protest brand to nonetheless attempt to link itself sympathetically to the state violence perpetrated against black Americans. Since the San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick kneeled during the national anthem in silent protest of police brutality in 2016, he has been unable to get a job in the league even as teams scrounge for competent players at his position. The NFL has repeatedly insisted that its teams did not collude against Kaepernick, and the league settled a lawsuit brought by him and his teammate Eric Reid in 2019. “The protesters’ reactions to these incidents reflect the pain, anger, and frustration that so many of us feel,” the NFL wrote on Twitter this weekend. The league promised that it was “committed to continuing the important work to address these systemic issues together with our players, clubs, and partners.”

[Jemele Hill: The NFL is suddenly worried about black lives]

At L’Oréal and in the NFL, black people were punished for doing what these brands have all declined to do in their responses to this crisis: Name a bad actor. Bergdorf identified white people as the chief architects of American racism. Kaepernick was responding to the catastrophic violence of police brutality. (Neither brand responded to requests for comment.)

Many large companies in the U.S. might feel comfortable invoking the Black Lives Matter movement when there’s little else appropriate for them to say, or acknowledging that racism exists when it’s all anyone’s talking about. But in describing those things as mysterious, intractable phenomena, they pull a neat little sleight of hand. These brands set themselves outside the systems they serve, marveling at the country’s racism as though it’s an invisible pathogen for which no one is responsible, and therefore one that no one can meaningfully address. If they caught a little bit of it themselves, it’s through no obvious fault of their own. They’re just trying to listen to their communities, as long as those communities don’t hold up a mirror right back at them.

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.