

BUSINESS RESPONSE TO FAMILY SEPARATION AT THE BORDER

As part of Weber Shandwick's ongoing series tracking business response to current events and broader societal issues, this eighth analysis assesses reaction to recent events at the U.S.-Mexico border. On May 7, 2018, Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced that the Justice Department would refer any person caught crossing the border illegally for criminal prosecution, resulting in the separation of minors from adults who are detained under this "zero tolerance" policy. By May 31, nearly 2,000 children were in mass detention centers or foster care.¹ We began tracking corporate responses as the business community started to speak out around mid-June. By June 28th, we captured statements from 98 companies and organizations. [And as of July 20th, 364 children had been reunited with their families, just six days before a court-ordered deadline for reunification.²]

Of the 98 organizations that responded through June 28, 2018 ...

- + 84% responded prior to President Trump signing an executive order on June 20, 2018, which ended the family separation policy. These comments came after a spike in media attention and criticism of the government action, as well as the first business community comments coming from a few CEOs. 15% responded after the order's signing (1% responded the day of the executive order signing, but exact timing could not be determined). 15% of corporate activists released statements both before and after the executive order.
- + 77% had the lead of their company (e.g., CEO, Chairman, Founder, President) respond.
- + 51% are "new" activists who had not responded to other events Weber Shandwick has tracked (immigration ban, withdrawal from Paris climate agreement, transgender military ban, Charlottesville protests, DACA repeal, the Parkland school shooting and sexual harassment). The largest share of these new voices comes from business and professional associations or human services non-profits.
- + Social media was the most common platform for companies to issue their responses, with 52% of companies responding through Twitter, 2% through Facebook and 1% through LinkedIn. 26% of companies were part of a joint statement or letter with other business leaders, 17% issued statements to the media and 15% posted something to their company website.
- + 40% are from the technology sector, 23% from non-profits or associations, 10% from the financial sector, 8% from business services and 7% from transportation. In all but one other issue Weber Shandwick has tracked, the Parkland shooting, the tech sector has been the leader in voicing opinion on current events. More non-profits were active on family separations than other issues we have monitored.
- + 29% are 2018 U.S. Fortune 500 companies.
- + 3% had employee groups write letters to their employers expressing their concern about the company providing goods or services relating to immigration to government agencies.

¹<https://ca.reuters.com/article/topNews/idCAKBN1JB2SF-OCATP>

²<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/20/us/migrant-families-reunite-texas.html>

In terms of the content of the responses...

- + 52% of companies called for an end to the policy and 24% demanded reunification of separated families.
- + 49% used strong terms such as “cruel,” “immoral,” “tragic” and “inhumane” to characterize the family separation policy. 36% described the government actions as anti-American.
- + 38% mentioned President Trump or his administration in their statements and a similar 35% mentioned Congress.
- + 31% called for broader immigration reform.
- + 24% raised concerns about the treatment of separated minors and its long-term impact.
- + 18% used one of the following: #FamiliesBelongTogether, #KeepFamiliesTogether or #ProtectFamilies.
- + 16% distanced their current work for the government from the family separations, and 4% (airlines) asked federal agencies to refrain from using their services for transporting separated minors.
- + 14% took an action, such as donating money or services to organizations working with separated families.
- + 11% mentioned their own company’s values.

Insights:

1. **Companies are staking out their moral authority.** Ethics were a key motivator for corporate activists on the family separation policy. Many expressed dismay over how the government’s actions went against the fabric and principles of our nation and some even pointed to their own company’s values for their activism. Companies also issued statements that raised concerns about the treatment of separated minors and its long-term impact.
2. **Activism can come in many forms.** Statements from senior leaders, spokespeople and organizations persist, but participating in a joint statement from a larger entity is also impactful. Letters to the president were signed by numerous executives, such as the Silicon Valley Leadership Group and 14 human services non-profits – all getting extra traction in the media.
3. **Companies must be prepared to respond from all sides.** Highly charged issues are bringing pressure on companies from both internal and external stakeholders. Some companies were asked by employee groups to reconsider government contracts out of fear they might be involved in the contentious policy. Others were on watch lists of activists such as Sleeping Giants, and subsequently received media coverage as “profiteers” of the family separations. Getting the record straight regarding what companies were and were not doing for government agencies became paramount.
4. **A precedent for very specific corporate demands has been established.** Not only did the corporate activists call for policy changes, including the end to family separations and comprehensive reforms, but they also offered legislative recommendations. Most intriguing was when airline companies specifically told federal agencies to exclude their aircraft when enforcing the family separation policy.
5. **Follow-ups and clarifications are commonplace.** While no company changed its position after President Trump signed the executive order ending family separations on June 20, some companies that responded before the order also issued statements afterwards. Some also issued clarifications to their positions after initial statements were released, or continued to comment on what they wanted to happen next.

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