Marketing Doctor

Marketing Check-up

Target

As of June 24, 2025

Condition: Under observation

When a brand promise changes

Target's results rise and fall with how many people visit its nearly 2,000 U.S. stores. In January 2025 it ended a set of diversity, equity and inclusion goals. Boycotts followed, and in the first quarter traffic and comparable sales fell, alongside falling consumer confidence and tariff uncertainty. We take no side on the issue. This check-up looks at what changed, what the numbers show and what the episode says about brand promises and the people who rely on them.

Key takeaways

- On January 24, 2025, Target said it would conclude its DEI goals and stop taking part in external surveys such as the Human Rights Campaign's index.
- Boycotts followed, including a 40-day boycott led by the Rev. Jamal Bryant that later became a full boycott.
- First-quarter transactions fell 2.4% and comparable sales fell 3.8%. Target's CEO named the reaction to the January changes as one of several headwinds, alongside falling consumer confidence and tariffs.
- In 2023 Target faced a backlash from the opposite direction over Pride merchandise. Both times, some customers read a public decision as a statement about who the brand was for.

Marketing health check

Area	Finding
Brand commitments	Contested. Changes read as statements about who Target is for.
Traffic	Falling. Transactions down 2.4% in the first quarter.
Customer trust	Strained with groups on different sides of past decisions.
Sales mix	Discretionary-heavy, so more exposed to swings in confidence.
Digital	Growing. Digital comparable sales up 4.7%.

Timeline

When	What happened
May 2023	Target removes some Pride Month merchandise, citing threats to workers' safety.
Q2 2023	Comparable sales fall 5.4%, the first quarterly decline in six years.
Jan 24, 2025	Target says it will conclude its DEI goals and stop taking part in external surveys.
Feb to Mar 2025	Foot traffic falls 9% and then 6.5% year over year, by Placer.ai data.
Mar 5, 2025	A 40-day boycott led by the Rev. Jamal Bryant begins.
Apr 2025	The boycott becomes a full boycott.
May 21, 2025	First-quarter comparable sales fall 3.8% and Target cuts its outlook.

What happened: a public commitment changed

On January 24, 2025, Target told employees it would conclude its diversity, equity and inclusion goals. It also said it would end a program set up in 2020 to support Black employees, shoppers and businesses, and stop taking part in external surveys, including the Human Rights Campaign's annual index, the Associated Press reported.

Some opponents of the change organized boycotts. The Rev. Jamal Bryant started a 40-day boycott on March 5, the AP reported, and later said it had become a full boycott. Placer.ai data reported by the Minnesota Star Tribune showed Target's foot traffic down 9% in February and 6.5% in March, though one analyst said boycotts might play a minor role next to general

economic uncertainty.

The diagnosis: commitments are part of the brand

- **Public decisions read as identity.** In both 2023 and 2025, some customers read a public decision as a statement about who the brand was for. The objections came from opposite directions.
- **Commitments have stakeholders.** Employees, suppliers, community partners and customers had relied on the January commitments. Part of a clear brand position is knowing which commitments people count as part of it.
- **Mixed causes.** Consumer confidence was falling and tariffs were uncertain. Groceries make up less than a quarter of Target's sales, so it depends more on discretionary items, which makes the cause of each lost visit hard to isolate.

The treatment: say it plainly, read the signals weekly

Before changing a commitment, list who relied on it and tell them first, in plain terms. A messaging framework helps say the same thing to each group. Then read the signals weekly: quarterly results arrive late and mix causes, while weekly traffic by region and customer group shows where a reaction is hitting while there is still time to respond. A regular marketing audit is the place to set that up.

The result: fewer visits

In the first quarter of 2025, comparable sales fell 3.8%. Store sales fell 5.7% while digital sales rose 4.7%. Transactions fell 2.4%, and Target cut its 2025 outlook to a low-single-digit sales decline. CEO Brian Cornell listed falling consumer confidence, tariff uncertainty and "the reaction to the updates we shared on Belonging in January" among the headwinds. Target said it could not reliably estimate how much each contributed.

The background matters. In May 2023 Target removed some Pride Month merchandise, citing threats to its workers' safety, and in that quarter comparable sales fell 5.4%, its first quarterly decline in six years.

Lessons for your marketing

1. A public commitment becomes part of the brand, whoever wrote it. Before you make one, decide whether you will keep it when conditions change.
2. Before you change one, list everyone who relied on it and tell them first.
3. Expect customers to read decisions as statements about who your brand is for.
4. Read traffic weekly by region and customer group. Quarterly results arrive late and mix causes.
5. Be consistent. Changing course in public tends to disappoint people on more than one side.

The doctor will see you now.

Book a free marketing check-up at marketingdoctor.ca/contact. We'll examine your marketing, show you what's holding growth back and prescribe what to fix first.

Sources

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