

Whale, What Now? A Case Analysis of SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment, Inc. 'Blackfish' Crisis

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Kami Muskat, Lauren Mayfield, Robin Aldridge, Wynter Battiste

Auburn University

SeaWorld Entertainment, Inc. (NYSE: SEAS) is comprised of Busch Gardens, SeaWorld, Aquatica, Discovery Cove, Adventure Island, Water Country USA and the Sesame Street-themed theme park Sesame Place. The theme park and entertainment company began in March 1959 with the opening of Busch Gardens in Tampa, Florida. A few years later, in 1964, the first SeaWorld opened in San Diego, California. SeaWorld was founded by George Millay, Milt Shedd, Ken Norris and David DeMott and was originally intended to be an underwater restaurant. The idea quickly expanded and eventually became a marine zoological park along the shore of Mission Bay, California (SeaWorld Entertainment, Inc., 2015)

Today, SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment, Inc. is actively trying to save the face of its company's infamous reputation ever since the release of the controversial documentary, 'Blackfish.' Directed by Gabriela Cowperthwaite, 'Blackfish' focuses on the death of former SeaWorld trainer Dawn Brancheau, whose life was taken by an orca named Tilikum. The film suggests that whale captivity is inhumane, and is critical of the physical and mental impact that captivity has on orcas. However, Brancheau's family released a statement claiming that the film was inaccurate and misleading (Garcia, 2014). Since the showing of the film in 2013, SeaWorld's attendance has fallen by four percent and the price of its share decreased by 50 percent (Mochari, 2014). Taking an aggressive approach, SeaWorld has launched numerous campaigns and social media sweeps in hopes of reputation recovery and reconciliation with the public. However, for SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment, Inc., the 'Blackfish' controversy was just the beginning of the years of criticism the theme park would face surrounding the strategies and tactics used while trying to tell their side of the story.

People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), and other animal rights activist groups, are longtime critics of the practices of theme parks, circuses and zoos. Activists argue that “captivity drives animals insane” and has detrimental effects on the well being of animals (“Zoos: An Idea Whose Time Has Come and Gone,” n.d). With the death of SeaWorld trainer Brancheau by orca whale Tilikum in February 2010, new discussions about SeaWorld’s safety practices and animal welfare arose. The release of the condemning ‘Blackfish’ documentary amplified the death of Brancheau and the history of Tilikum to a broader audience (Eberi, 2013). When CNN premiered ‘Blackfish’, it attracted a large audience—totaling over \$2 billion earned in the North American Domestic Box Office. This showing not only had consequential effects on the company, but it also affected customers, investors, employees and partners. Mattel stopped the production of its ‘SeaWorld Trainer Barbie’ (Popken, 2015) and Southwest Airlines ended their longtime partnership with the marine park (Raab, 2014).

The issue with the Blackfish crisis is SeaWorld’s inability to respond efficiently and appropriately to the situation at stake. For example, On December 31, 2013, the Orlando Business Journal posted a poll on their website asking, “Has CNN’s ‘Blackfish’ documentary changed your perception of SeaWorld?” A majority of the votes stated that the film had not changed their opinion. However, it was later found that 55 percent of the votes originated from a single SeaWorld-hosted IP address (Bilbao, 2014). SeaWorld defended the voting, stating that “each of the votes that came from a SeaWorld domain were cast by team members who are passionate about the incredible work SeaWorld does and the experiences our parks provide” (Gates, 2014). This is just one example of several mishaps in the strategies and tactics used to preserve SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment, Inc.’s brand.

Strategy

In Aug. 15, 2014, an entire year after 'Blackfish' was released, SeaWorld of San Diego announced the Blue World Project. This is a new environment for the orcas. The total water volume is increasing to 10 million gallons, which is double the size of the previous tanks, maximum depth of 50 feet with a surface area of 1.5 acres. Visitors will be able to walk along the whales and interact with them. The Blue World Project is expected to open in 2018 for the SeaWorld San Diego location. SeaWorld Orlando and SeaWorld San Antonio plan on having a Blue World Project of their own as well. However, many animal right activist groups believe that SeaWorld's announcement of their Blue World Project is only to reserve the damage that has been caused by 'Blackfish'. PETA's director of animal law, Jared Goodman told the *LA Times*, "This is a desperate drop-in-the-bucket move to try to turn back the hands of time when people understand the suffering of captive orcas, and it will not save the company. A bigger prison is still a prison." (Weinberger, 2014)

In March 2016, SeaWorld announced to the public that they would end their theatrical show programs, but not immediately. SeaWorld San Diego's theatrical orca shows will end in 2017 whereas SeaWorld Orlando and SeaWorld San Antonio will not end their theatrical shows until 2019. SeaWorld has not captured any orcas from the wild in 40 years but has continued to breed them. SeaWorld also announced in March 2016, that they were going to end orca breeding. On April 19, 2017, SeaWorld's last orca was born meaning this will be the last generation of orcas. Orcas can live up 30 years in captivity, which means orcas are still going to be at SeaWorld for at least another 30 years. SeaWorld has also partnered with HSUS—Humane Society of the United States—to help protect and preserve wild animals and their homes. SeaWorld and HSUS are both making efforts to protect coral reefs and marine species, stop

killing of whales, seals and other marine life in the wild, and to provide more sustainable seafood for the animals in their parks.

We somewhat agree with SeaWorld's strategy after the release of 'Blackfish'. SeaWorld is taking the right steps to stop some of the hate and backlash they received from the release of the documentary, but they are taking a while to achieve these steps. Today, SeaWorld Orlando and SeaWorld San Antonio still have theatrical orca shows. Orcas are still living in small cages because the Blue World Project is not going to be finished until 2018. While we understand that SeaWorld could not make these changes over night, they could have sped up the process.

'Blackfish' was released in 2013, but SeaWorld did not announce until 2014 that they will have bigger tanks for the orcas and did not announce until 2016 that they will end theatrical shows and orca breeding. Once orcas are in captivity it is very hard for them to survive in the wild. Instead of building bigger tanks SeaWorld could have considered building sanctuaries for the orcas. Sanctuaries is the next best option because the orcas could come in to eat food but have more space without being in a tank and without having to learn how to live in the ocean. No matter if they stop orca breeding or expand their cages, SeaWorld will never get back the lives of the trainers and orcas that died in their care.

Tactics

SeaWorld has had a long journey in their response to 'Blackfish' with many different tactics, some good, some questionable. Since the film, SeaWorld has turned to writing the film off and countering its claims. At first, SeaWorld ignored 'Blackfish' despite the films growing popularity and accompanied backlash. It was not until December 2013 that SeaWorld responded by using full-page ads in the New York Times, USA Today and other major papers. According to the Orlando Sentinel, the ad SeaWorld uses is an "open letter" from SeaWorld animal

advocates defending the way they care for the 29 whales in its corporate collection. SeaWorld never actually identifies 'Blackfish' by name in the ad, but it was its first step to rebut criticisms from the film and the animal-rights activist promoting it (Garcia, 2013). This did not seem to benefit SeaWorld at all. In fact, it caused animal activists and social media users to discredit the ad on social media and add additional backlash.

A few months after the ad, SeaWorld turned to social media and a special section of their website to tell the "truth" about how they treat their animals. SeaWorld officially uses 'Blackfish' by name on the news release they post on their official website stating why 'Blackfish' is propaganda, not a documentary. In this news release, they state that they "object to Blackfish because its two central premises are wrong: (1) that life at SeaWorld is harmful for killer whales and for trainers working with these animals, and that (2) that SeaWorld has attempted to cover up the facts surrounding the tragic death of trainer Dawn Brancheau in 2010, as well the history of Tilikum, the killer whale involved in that accident" (SeaWorld Entertainment, Inc., 2013). SeaWorld goes on to say that 'Blackfish' used false and misleading points to manipulate viewers emotionally. SeaWorld then list what they say is the truth, in a collection of "69 reasons you shouldn't believe Blackfish" accompanied by a slogan saying "RT the truth" (SeaWorld Entertainment, Inc., 2013). The website highlights the significant examples of when they believed the film lied, along with SeaWorld's attempt to argue the truth with links to supporting documents. This news release is an attempt to convince the public that 'Blackfish' is propaganda and not the actual truth. They also try to convince the public to spread the "truth" about SeaWorld by asking users to Retweet the link that lists the 69 reasons why you should not believe 'Blackfish.' This news release was accompanied by some positive feedback as users were Retweeting the claims SeaWorld made, however, there was also a lot of negative

feedback as users, especially animal rights activists. The users were claiming that SeaWorld is not saying the truth and that 'Blackfish' makes more accurate claims.

In August 2014, SeaWorld announced their plan to build bigger tanks for orcas at their San Diego the same week as a major stock price plunge. Many people thought this plan was announced because of the backlash from 'Blackfish,' however, the former CEO of SeaWorld Jim Atchison said the company had been planning the expansion for years and that is was in no way caused by the backlash related to 'Blackfish' (McSwain and Weisberg, 2014). This actually caused a lot of the public to grow angrier at SeaWorld, and many people responded by saying how SeaWorld needs to stop using the whales altogether since the size of the tanks will never be as big as the ocean. This backlash continued to go on for several months with little response from SeaWorld.

Then in March 2015, SeaWorld's PR team released a web video and newspaper ad campaign responding to PETA and 'Blackfish.' The web video responds to the claims made by animal-right activists that SeaWorld's killer whales do not live as long as those in the wild (SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment, 2015). SeaWorld's Head Veterinarian Chris Dold refutes those claims by stating that killer whales in their tanks live just as long as killer whales in the wild. The newspaper ad campaign directly names PETA by stating that they spread claims about SeaWorld to raise money. SeaWorld states in the ad "they will continue to take them on and make sure people have all information they need" (Allen, 2015). Animal activist responded by stating that this is not true and that the whales live longer in the wild.

SeaWorld then turns back to social media in March 2015 in their #AskSeaWorld campaign, where they invited Twitter users to Tweet questions for veterinarians and trainers to answer. This campaign backfired on them as thousands of users Tweeted harsh questions

regarding SeaWorld mistreating their animals. SeaWorld then Tweeted from their official page, blaming PETA for spamming the campaign, noting that 70 percent of questions came from bots and animal rights groups (SeaWorld, 2015).

In response to one of SeaWorld's former trainers John Hargrove speaking out about SeaWorld in 'Blackfish' and in his books, SeaWorld released a five-minute video of Hargrove in which he is having a slurring, presumably drunken, phone conversation with a friend in which he repeatedly uses the N-word. SeaWorld links the video in an email sent to different media organizations and warns them that anyone interviewing the 'Blackfish' star should be aware of the video (Pedicini, 2015). This video attempts to discredit Hargrove. While a lot of people were upset by his use of language in the video, the public did not discredit what Hargrove has said about SeaWorld.

For the most part, people grew angrier with SeaWorld as it received a ton of backlash on all their attempts to bring their side of the story to what 'Blackfish' said. However, some people did side with SeaWorld, and even defended it on social media. It seems like there is a big percentage of the population that does not really care about the situation either, and they will continue to visit SeaWorld despite the backlash.

While we believe the 'Blackfish' case has hurt SeaWorld to the point they will never be the same again, we also believe that SeaWorld did a good job in using several different tactics to respond to the situation. With a case as large as this one, we believe it is important to stay in the public eye by defending yourself. While many credible sources show that SeaWorld's claims are not accurate, we still think it was a good idea that SeaWorld released news releases and ads defending themselves against PETA and 'Blackfish.' We also liked how SeaWorld allowed the public to ask them questions in their #AskSeaWorld campaign. While the campaign was

unsuccessful overall, we do believe it is a good idea to allow to public to voice their concerns. SeaWorld could have done a better job at acknowledging that they hear what the public is saying and how they are going to change. Even when SeaWorld announced some “improvements” to their park, they did not want credit those changes to the backlash they received. For example, when SeaWorld announced its idea to open bigger tanks for the orcas, the CEO stated the expansion had nothing to do with ‘Blackfish.’ We think it would be have been better to have said the expansion was because they hear what the public is saying and they agree the whales should have bigger tanks.

We do not agree that SeaWorld should have responded with any sort of malice. For example, we found it unprofessional that they released the video of the former SeaWorld employee using harsh language while in a drunken state just to discredit him. While the video may have helped shape the media’s opinion of him, it seems childish to go down to that level. This made SeaWorld seem unprofessional, which may have hurt their image even more.

Evaluation/Continuation

After the SeaWorld was faced with the ‘Blackfish’ crises, they made efforts to restore their image. In March 2016, SeaWorld stated that they would be using new orca encounters instead of the theatrical shows (Bomey, 2016). They started to do this because in ‘Blackfish,’ the orcas were shown to be under a lot of stress when doing the theatrical shows. The documentary also shows how the orcas are a threat to the trainers. The public was happy about SeaWorld stopping the shows, however, there was still a lot of backlash saying SeaWorld needs to stop using the whales for good.

A huge change was announced that same month as well, as SeaWorld, in an agreement with the Humane Society of the United States, stated that they are going to stop breeding their

orcas. In a news release announced on their website, SeaWorld announced, "The killer whales currently in our care will be the last generation of killer whales at SeaWorld. The company will end all orca breeding as of today" (SeaWorld Entertainment, Inc., 2016). In the news release, SeaWorld explains how they believe ending the breeding program is the best thing to do for the whales and visitors. While many people argue that SeaWorld should free the whales they currently have as well.

SeaWorld continues to make efforts to improve their image. On their website, they have a specific section called "The New SeaWorld." In this section, they discuss how the new SeaWorld will not breed any new whales and how they will make life better for the current whales they do have. SeaWorld states, "While the animals are with us, we will be changing their habitats and their performances. The all-new orca experiences will soon take place in more natural looking habitats, and with a focus on the whales' natural behaviors. The new "encounters" will include the awe-inspiring moments you love with an added emphasis on education and conservation" (SeaWorld Entertainment, Inc., 2017). Under this specific section there are many news releases regarding how they are changing SeaWorld for the better. SeaWorld also is trying to shift their image from the whales to how they care for other animals. They do this by releasing information on social media and on their website about how they help protect and save animals. SeaWorld releases information on the different animals they save, heal, then release, and how everyone can help out to save sea life.

Case Analysis/Conclusion

SeaWorld faced potentially detrimental backlash after the release of 'Blackfish'. In our opinion, the way the company responded to the crisis was not the best. However after some time had elapsed, SeaWorld created several strategies to keep the parks afloat. The film, released in

2013, focused on the death of a killer whale trainer, and stated claims to SeaWorld's inhumane treatment and captivity of animals. Several publics were involved and were affected by the controversy. Customers, investors, employees and the well-being of the captive orcas all play major roles in the outcome of the backlash of 'Blackfish.' Public perception of SeaWorld immediately shifted with the release of the film. SeaWorld utilized several crisis management tactics in order to regain a positive image. They sent out news releases, ad campaigns and social media campaigns as a way to defend themselves. While SeaWorld used several successful and positive tactics, they also attempted to defend themselves through the use of some questionable tactics. The release of the video of a former employee using foul language while intoxicated was a childish attempt and caused the public to think less of SeaWorld as a company. As a group, we believe SeaWorld had several successful crisis management tactics and strategies, but that they should have used them in a timelier manner.

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