

The Post-*Blackfish* World: An analysis of SeaWorld's strategic communication efforts

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SeaWorld's Goal	
To dispel <i>Blackfish</i> 's claims through the use of new and traditional forms of media.	
<p>Scenario. <i>Blackfish</i> premieres at 2013 Sundance Film Festival. The documentary tells the story of Tilikum, an orca who killed three people while captive, and explores SeaWorld's practices and treatment of orcas.</p> <p>The fallout. Social media outrage, PETA and other activist groups, and celebrities speak out and take action. Financial impact - park attendance declines, stock plummets, and CEO resigns.</p>	<p>Method. Case study research dissects the strategic communication efforts by SeaWorld as it navigates the post-<i>Blackfish</i> world. Authors reviewed news stories, opinion pieces, and transcripts, and utilized the topsy search engine to locate social media posts between 2013 and 2014.</p>
<p>Theoretical application. The analysis of strategic and conflictual relationships between SeaWorld and its publics is placed on a continuum anchored by pure advocacy and pure accommodation (Cancel, Cameron, Sallot, & Mitrook, 1997).</p>	<p>Overarching strategies.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inoculate target audience by dispelling <i>Blackfish</i> claims 2. Directly address <i>Blackfish</i> content on social media and the Web 3. Showcase care of orcas 4. Reposition SeaWorld as a global conservation leader.

<p>Practical implications.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Control the message 2. Mass tweets, bots, and social media presence can energize the opposition 3. Consider employing strategic ambiguity on social media 4. Avoid premature announcement that carry significance

Classroom Discussion Questions & Activity

How could SeaWorld have prepared prior to the release of *Blackfish* at the Sundance Film Festival?

Do you believe SeaWorld's strategies and tactics would have been more effective if they were implemented at the onset of the crisis? Why or why not?

As a member of SeaWorld's target public, you have been asked to join a focus group. Given public perception of SeaWorld, what do you suggest they do to convince you to support the organization?

Team Activity: Congratulations, SeaWorld hired your team as consultants in 2011 because they learned about the production of a documentary that will explore the treatment of orcas at SeaWorld parks. You team is tasked with dealing with the situation. Part 1: What is your initial response? Part 2: Develop 2-3 key messages for the Develop two strategies and corresponding tactics.

