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Crisis of the Week: SeaWorld Has a Whale of a Problem



Sandy Huffaker for The Wall Street Journal

Killer Whales and their trainers perform during the Shamu Show at SeaWorld in San Diego, CA in June 2014.

This week offers a whale of a crisis—literally. [SeaWorld Entertainment Inc.](#) this month [launched a campaign](#) to fight back against allegations it mistreats its killer whales and [lawsuits](#). The company began [running ads](#) on television, put out an [online video](#) and [set up a website](#) to tell its side of the story and [refute reports](#) it doesn't take proper care of the whales, one of the most popular attractions at its parks. The controversy appears to have [hurt](#) visitor attendance and revenue.

The crisis experts were asked to review the company's various efforts and share their insights into how well the campaign is designed, how effective it is at telling the company's side of the story and whether it adequately addresses the concerns laid out by its critics.

Andrea Bonime-Blanc, chief executive and founder of GEC Risk Advisory: "The SeaWorld

crisis is one that may be getting beyond the company's control, not because its crisis management effort isn't professional or even effective but because as consumers become more sensitive to animal welfare issues, the type of entertainment SeaWorld offers may be losing its luster.

"SeaWorld operates in a multi-stakeholder environment. The crux of the crisis lies in the very nature of what SeaWorld does—using captive, powerful wild animals for human entertainment. While such entertainment continues to please certain stakeholders some of the time (families on vacation), it has incited vociferous concerted opprobrium from others (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, other animal rights organizations, pro bono law firms), who in turn influence families' choices and thereby revenues.

"SeaWorld may be in a no-win situation: No matter how much good they may actually be doing for wildlife (as they repeatedly state in their PR materials), that message gets drowned out by equally powerful messages by famous spokespeople that these magnificent wild mammals are confined to small, sad spaces, living shorter and more miserable lives.

"SeaWorld may want to rethink its approach to this crisis not by trying to improve on an already well-developed crisis and PR effort but by looking critically at its current business model and considering how it can better manage its strategic risks. For example, they could develop greater transparency about the health and safety of their killer whales via independent third-party inspections or audits that are made public. The new bottom line is this: SeaWorld needs to go beyond crisis management and think about strategic risk management and how to transform its current crisis into a better, more sustainable business model."

Shannon Wilkinson, chief executive, Reputation Communications: "SeaWorld has taken a combative stance, attacking not just the claims but the organizations making them. The company has set itself up as the villain in a fight it can't win.

"In company statements, SeaWorld called a recent lawsuit against it 'clearly a publicity stunt' by 'animal [rights] extremists.' The company's 'Sea World Cares' website purports to provide factual rebuttals, along with a petition inviting people to 'Stand with SeaWorld.' It includes a document listing '69 Reasons Why You Shouldn't Believe Blackfish,' referring to the 2013 [documentary](#) that ignited this crisis.

"But SeaWorld's opponents have a level of credibility and stature that makes this kind of smear campaign likely to backfire. The International Marine Mammal Project led the campaign to return the orca star of 'Free Willy' home to the open sea of Iceland. The Earth Island Institute fought for and initiated 'Dolphin-Safe Tuna.' Even PETA, which leads the activist campaign to free SeaWorld's orca whales, is not criticizing SeaWorld's business model. PETA's focus is the

welfare of the whales.

“SeaWorld’s rebuttals include videos featuring company employees telling the company’s point of view. Some experts are included, but not many. They are not a match against ‘Blackfish’ or for the new [book](#): ‘Beneath the Surface: Killer Whales, SeaWorld, and the Truth Beyond Blackfish.’

“From a reputational standpoint, SeaWorld’s best option is to find a way to partner with its critics and address their demands. It isn’t too late to do so...and it can win them new, lifelong fans.”

Jennifer Vickery, chief executive, National Strategies Public Relations: “SeaWorld needs to change its approach to meet the demands of the public. With anti-zoo sentiments and revealing documentaries, no counter communication will fix the issue. SeaWorld is better off evolving into a rehabilitation center and helping wildlife directly in their habitat while educating the public and children about animal care.

“SeaWorld’s attempt to counter allegations about abuse or mistreatment is done poorly for the main reason that the curtain has been lifted and the public now has a deeper understanding of the issues involving these animals, which cannot be undone. The only thing SeaWorld can actually do to overcome this issue is to no longer have killer whales as an attraction and care for them in the wild, as they claim their intentions are to care for the animals.

“Giving veterinary and health information about these animals via their website, YouTube videos, or answering Twitter questions does seem like a fresh communications approach to their PR crisis. However, it doesn’t answer the one question: Do killer whales enjoy living at SeaWorld versus the wild? This is a public question that from a communications standpoint cannot be answered from SeaWorld as an organization—and the public along with documentaries has already largely determined otherwise.

“SeaWorld is continuing to state it does not collect animals from the wild and its whales are healthy but it needs to be more transparent and show more of its efforts. SeaWorld’s We Care program claims it rescues, spends millions on care and protects wildlife. The problem is while this may be indeed true, it still is doing something unnatural by keeping these wild animals confined and used in an unfavorable way.”

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