

**SeaWorld vs Blackfish:
Will The Orcas Sink The Animal Theme Park Into
Oblivion?**

MANAGEMENT DECISIONS

The authors prepared this case solely as a basis for class discussion and not as an endorsement, a source of primary data, or an illustration of effective or ineffective management. Although based on real events and despite occasional references to actual companies, this case is fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons or entities is coincidental.

As can be seen from the time line, SeaWorld's crisis grew over several years. Although it started after the death of Dawn Brancheau, the crisis hit its highest point after the release of *Blackfish*. The company's reputation got tarnished due to an increase of opposition amongst celebrities, animal rights activists and the general media. Additionally, the company has been involved in multiple law suits, saw several partnerships come to an end and experienced a steep drop in visitor rates as well as stock value.

As the two events are highly intertwined and both had a major impact on the company's reputation, it has been decided to split the managerial decisions to the two key events and the actions taken.

1. The Death of Dawn Brancheau: Diminishing Responsibility

The company diminished its responsibility for the death of Dawn Brancheau and denied accusations from former employees, accusing them and other visitors of extortion.

It is believed that on the 24th of February, SeaWorld instructed the local Sheriff's Office to tell the media that Dawn slipped and fell into the pool. However, witnesses came forward on social media stating that Tilikum grabbed her. SeaWorld consequently made a statement that Tilikum had grabbed her ponytail, believing that it was a toy.

Although reports have shown that Dawn was grabbed by her arm, SeaWorld upholds that Tilikum grabbed her by her ponytail and that the trainer was careless by allowing her hair to get close to the animal's mouth. According to The Orca Project, a website started by former trainers, SeaWorld's decision to maintain that it was Dawn's fault made it possible for SeaWorld to impose a policy in which female trainers now had to wear their hair in a bun, making it seem like they took action.

"So with the overwhelming evidence that Dawn was not taken down by her ponytail, how is it that SeaWorld has successfully manipulated the media to follow their lead? Simply put... good PR and even better deception. The Ponytail Theory is just that. A theory that doesn't hold weight and has no merit." - The Orca Project.

Besides the no ponytail policy, SeaWorld removed its trainers from the water and built a \$70 million fast rising floor to get trainers out of the water quicker if something similar would occur again. Additionally, they took Tilikum out of the orca show right after the event. However, he was allowed back a year later as SeaWorld deemed the physical activity necessary for the animal's health.

Soon after the event, SeaWorld found itself confronted by multiple stakeholders, causing several lawsuits. SeaWorld was successful in challenging the fine from OSHA, resulting in a reduction from \$75,000 to \$12,000. However, the company publicly denied any claims made regarding the obstructing of OSHA investigations. Additionally, they stated that both lawsuits from former employees as well as that of a traumatised family was merely to seek monetary damages.

2. Blackfish: Denying the Facts and Advocating Their Good Work

After the release of *Blackfish*, the company's reputation got damaged severely. The company mainly used advocacy strategies to communicate and remind their stakeholders of their previous good work. Moreover, they denied most claims made in the documentary.

Although *Blackfish* reached many people once it appeared online and on CNN, it did not harm SeaWorld's reputation in one blow but rather through multiple waves. Along the way, SeaWorld has implemented several marketing campaigns to save its reputation.

July 2013-December 2014: The truth about Blackfish

A day before Magnolia Pictures would release the documentary, SeaWorld sent out an eight-point list to 50 film critics explaining what they deemed inaccurate about the movie.

"Although 'Blackfish' is by most accounts a powerful, emotionally-moving piece of advocacy, it is also shamefully dishonest, deliberately misleading, and scientifically inaccurate. As the late scholar and U.S. Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan famously noted: 'You are entitled to your opinion. But you are not entitled to your own facts.'" - Press Release, SeaWorld

Supplementary to the letter, SeaWorld started an online campaign which included the setup of the web page "The truth about *Blackfish*" in which they explained their side of the story and provided a critical analysis of the documentary to show its one-sided approach [Exhibit 1]. The online campaign was further extended in 2014 when they released YouTube videos in which experts and employees debunked *Blackfish*. Throughout the year, the online campaign was supported by press releases. After the cancellation of multiple artists for events through the year, they also placed a full-page advertisement in several national newspapers to defend the treatment of its animals.

Besides its media strategy, several other managerial decisions were taken. First, the company decided to appeal the OSHA ban on restricting interaction with killer whales during performances. After multiple attempts, SeaWorld remained unsuccessful and the ban stayed put. Second, as a measure to protect its employees and animals from the "threats" received by animal rights activists such as PETA, CEO Jim Atchison asked a human resources employee to pose as an animal rights activist and join their protests to gain insights.

Though almost 2 years after the release of *Blackfish*, SeaWorld's reputation was still damaged. Ultimately, CEO Atchison resigned in December 2014. This was followed by the layoff of 311 other SeaWorld team members to save money.

March 2015: SeaWorld Cares & #AskSeaWorld

Following the arrival of the new CEO Joel Manby, SeaWorld started the “SeaWorld Cares” advertisement campaign aimed at promoting SeaWorld as a zoological and research organisation rather than merely a theme park company. The Senior Marketing Officer at SeaWorld explained that the campaign was aimed at “turning the park inside out, so that guests can see all the good work we’re doing with animals in terms of rescue, rehabilitation, treatment, and to promote a greater appreciation of the whole mission.” The advertisements appeared both online, in print and on television.

To further support the campaign, the company partnered up with The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation in May that year. The company pledged \$10 Billion in funding for their Killer Whale Research and Conservation Programme [Exhibit 2].

A few days after the SeaWorld Cares campaign, the company launched the #AskSeaWorld campaign. The campaign attempted to educate people and to invite the broader public to ask questions via Twitter which they would answer on their website seaworldcares.com. However, animal rights activists and critical stakeholders used this opportunity to critique the company [Exhibit 3]. As a result, SeaWorld’s media team stopped replying to some of the questions and became somewhat “sassy” in its response [Exhibit 4].

November 2015- January 2017: The end of the Orca Show

Despite the previous campaigns, SeaWorld remained a target for growing criticism and consequently suffered low attendance rates and stock value. In November 2015, CEO Manby announced that the management had heard their guests’ opinion and would end the killer whale show in San Diego by the end of 2016.

The company was initially planning on extending the killer whale habitats but stopped when the Californian Coastal Commission placed a ban on orca breeding in California. Due to the new ban, SeaWorld’s management made the following decisions:

1. The killer whale habitats will not be expanded but rather re-designed to make them look more natural. This will include pools with rocks and trees and a big interactive screen behind it. The transformation will be done gradually, starting in San Diego in 2017 [Exhibit 5].
2. The current killer whale population at SeaWorld will be the last one [Exhibit 6].
3. It will phase out the Orca Show at all SeaWorld parks having started with San Diego in 2016. The new park in Abu Dhabi will not have any killer whales at all.
4. The Orca Shows will be replaced with more educational experiences that focus on demonstrating the killer whales’ natural behaviours and abilities as top predators.

Exhibit 1. Webpage “Truth about Blackfish”.



Why “Blackfish” is Propaganda, not a Documentary

We 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 (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. Nothing could be further from the truth.

To make these ultimately false and misleading points, the film conveys falsehoods, manipulates viewers emotionally and relies on questionable filmmaking techniques to create “facts” that support its point of view.

Here's the truth:

1. Blackfish employs false and emotionally manipulative sequences concerning the collection and separation of killer whales.
2. The film relies on former SeaWorld employees, most of whom have little experience with killer whales, and others who haven't worked at SeaWorld in nearly 20 years.
3. The film also relies on animal rights activists masquerading as scientists.
4. The film spins an entirely fictitious account of Dawn Brancheau's death in order to advance its anti-captivity narrative.
5. To advance both its anti-captivity narrative and its false theories surrounding Ms. Brancheau's death, the film falsely suggests that Tilikum had become psychotic and aggressive.
6. The film falsely suggests that important facts about Tilikum were concealed from his trainers and that SeaWorld is indifferent to trainer safety.

Exhibit 2. Press release regarding the partnership with NFWF.

SEAWORLD ENTERTAINMENT, INC. ANNOUNCES SUPPORT FOR THE NATIONAL FISH AND WILDLIFE FOUNDATION'S KILLER WHALE RESEARCH AND CONSERVATION PROGRAMME

Category: Latest News, Science & Research | 22/05/2015

[← BACK](#)




19 May 2015 – SeaWorld Entertainment, Inc. today announced a commitment of \$1.5 million over three years to a new partnership with The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) through the Killer Whale Research and Conservation Programme (KWRCP). Support of the KWRCP is part of SeaWorld's \$10 million pledge to fund research and conservation for killer whales in the wild – the largest private commitment of its kind.

The KWRCP will focus on three strategies: increasing prey availability; improving habitat quality; and strengthening management through crucial research. NFWF will seek to match this commitment with additional public and private dollars and plans to release an initial Request for Proposals (RFP) June 8 in conjunction with the global celebration of World Oceans Day.

"SeaWorld and the SeaWorld & Busch Gardens Conservation Fund have long supported organisations that focus on results-driven, on-the-ground research and conservation work," said Joel Manby, president and chief executive officer of SeaWorld Entertainment, Inc. "NFWF has a longstanding reputation for working efficiently and effectively to conserve species and their habitats and we are looking forward to working together to protect wild killer whale populations."


Exhibit 3. Examples of #AskSeaWorld tweets.

 **Kelli Lovett**
@KellisKupcakes Follow

.@SeaWorld why do you provide more area for us to park our cars than you give these animals to live? #AskSeaWorld

RETWEETS 14 FAVORITES 38

11:57 AM - 26 Mar 2015

 **E. Grodzik**
@RunitsGrodzilla Follow

Hey @SeaWorld- why don't any of your Shamu stuffed animals have rake marks or collapsed dorsal fins? #AskSeaWorld #EmptyTheTanks

RETWEETS 71 LIKES 65

7:13 AM - 27 Mar 2015

Exhibit 4. Example of SeaWorld's response.

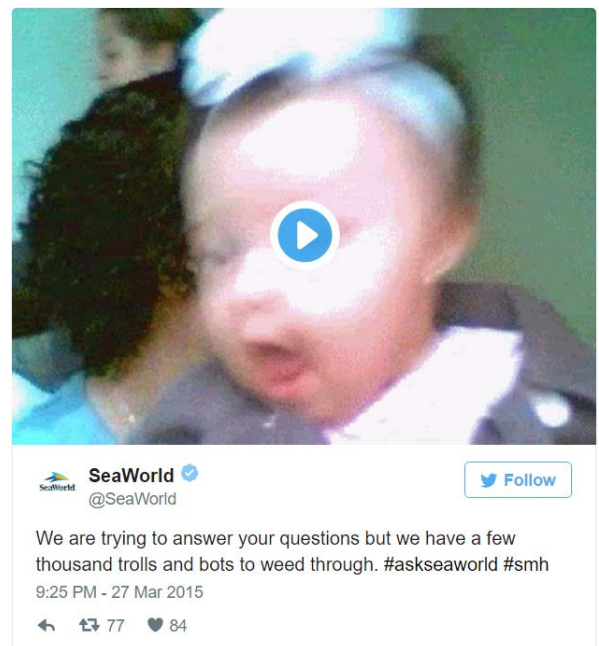


Exhibit 5. The new killer whale habitat.



Exhibit 6. SeaWorld announces last generation of Orcas.

SEAWORLD ANNOUNCES LAST GENERATION OF ORCAS IN ITS CARE

Category: Latest News | 21/03/2016

[← BACK](#)



SeaWorld Entertainment, a leading theme park and entertainment company, today announced that the killer whales – or orcas – currently in the company's care will be the last generation of orcas at SeaWorld. The company will end all orca breeding as of today.

SeaWorld also will introduce new, inspiring, natural orca encounters, rather than theatrical shows, as part of its ongoing commitment to education, marine science research, and rescue of marine animals. These programs will focus on orca enrichment, exercise, and overall health. This change will start in its San Diego park next year, followed by San Antonio and then Orlando in 2019.

SeaWorld also announced today a broad new partnership with the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) to protect our oceans and the animals that call them home. The company is committing to educating its more than 20 million annual visitors on animal welfare and conservation issues through interpretative programs at the parks and expanded advocacy for wild whales, seals, and other marine creatures.