

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

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**TEACHING NOTES**

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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.

# Introduction

The aim of the teaching notes is to guide the professor during the presentation of the SeaWorld vs Blackfish case. While the written case and the managerial decisions give a comprehensive overview of the crisis at SeaWorld, the teaching plan will help directing the presentation so that a constructive and engaging class discussion can be achieved. Additionally, the suggestions made should ensure the students will achieve the proposed learning objectives.

The document will start with a case synopsis that will give a clear idea about the case and whether it will be relevant for the professor. Following, it will define the learning objectives, provide the professor with main and assisting questions and finally present teaching suggestions accompanied with a suggested time and board plan.

## Case Synopsis

Generally, it is assumed that a crisis is caused by one big event. However sometimes it is formed by several events that add up and end in a wide-reaching crisis.

The crisis at SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment started in 2010 when killer whale Tilikum killed senior trainer Dawn Brancheau just after the orca show. Though traumatizing for the park and visitors, the situation got made worse when SeaWorld released contradictory statements about how and why it happened. As a consequence, questions were raised among various stakeholders.

Three years later, while still dealing with lawsuits regarding safety measures and unhappy stakeholders, the company's name was again on everyone's lips. In an attempt to reveal the truth about Dawn's death, Gabriela Cowperthwaite released the documentary *Blackfish*. The documentary features Tilikum, his life and the effects that captivity has on killer whales. *Blackfish* was released at an important time as moral and ethical movements towards captivity of animals had already started growing. For this reason, the moral crisis inflicted upon the company resulted in a severe reputational crisis that affected the brand's core. The effect of the crisis and the extent to which the reputation was harmed became visible through the decline of share value and visitor rates as well as through the repetitive online and offline protests.

This case study will allow students to grasp the reach of ethical movements and the impact a crisis can have on an organization's identity and reputation. Additionally, it will highlight the necessity of following the correct crisis communication strategy.

# Learning objectives

## Corporate Brand Identity

The corporate brand identity functions as a starting point of a firm's or an organisation's value creation process and exists out of multiple elements, such as personality, culture and mission and vision, that together answer the question of "raison d'être" (Urde, 2013). Out of all elements, it is argued that the brand core is the most essential (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Roper & Fill, 2012; Urde, 2013; Urde & Greyser, 2016). The brand core, existing out of the brand promise and brand values, should remain consistent as it serves as the brick upon which consumers build their trust in the organisation (Roper & Fill, 2012).

SeaWorld Entertainment & Parks Inc. has the core values of inspire, educate, enlighten and connect. These together build to the promise: "We are a leading theme park and entertainment company that blends imagination with nature and enables our guests to explore, inspire, and act" (SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment, Inc, 2015). While Dawn Brancheau's death was mostly depicted as a crisis revolving around safety measurements at the park, the documentary *Blackfish* raised questions that directly affected the brand core. Not only did it highlight that using killer whales for entertainment and keeping them in captivity might be detrimental for the animal's well-being, it also underlined how the company misinformed its visitors about the whales. This is a direct attack on the core values of educate and enlighten.

To analyse the damage caused by an attack on the brand core, one could refer to Urde's (2013) Corporate Brand Identity Matrix [**Exhibit 1**]. The CBIM exists out of 3 layers: Internal, Internal/External and External. The arrows in the matrix indicate the relation between elements across the different layers and emphasise the need for connecting the brand core with the other elements. Thus, to grasp to what extent the crisis impacted SeaWorld, it is necessary to analyse the brand core and evaluate which elements have been affected.

## Corporate Reputation

While the corporate brand identity is internally rooted, the corporate reputation takes the external view of the market environment as a starting point (Urde & Greyser, 2016). The corporate reputation is the image or perception of the company that has been developed over time by all internal and external stakeholders (deChernatony and Harris, 2000; Roper and Fill, 2012, Urde & Greyser, 2016).

In reputation management, perception is reality and, irrespective of the factual circumstances, influences a company's competitive strength (Greyser, 2009). This notion is especially relevant in this case study. Although SeaWorld tried to fight the information presented in *Blackfish*, the perception of the company, formed by all those who had seen the documentary, caused a steep decline in attendance rate and value of shares which deeply influenced the company's competitive strength.

While the corporate identity is rooted internally and reputation externally, various researchers have identified a strong relationship between the two (Aaker, 2004; Fombrun and Van Riel, 2004; Kapferer, 2012; Roper and Fill, 2012). For this reason, Urde & Greyser (2016) proposed the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix [**Exhibit 2**]. The matrix contains the earlier mentioned CBIM at the core and is enlarged with reputational elements such as credibility, trustworthiness or responsibility. To successfully solve a crisis, it is crucial to understand the crisis' origin and identify the affected stakeholder groups (Greyser, 2009). The CBIRM matrix helps in grasping the extent of the crisis as affected identity elements and their impact on reputation can be detected. Accordingly, steps can be taken to close the identity-reputation-gap and adjust elements per the new environment. Thus, to analyse the reputational damage of SeaWorld, one should look at the identity elements that were harmed and measure to what extent the reputational elements have been changed or affected.

## **Crisis Communications**

A crisis is likely to occur when the brand promise and core values have not been met in the eyes of the stakeholders. The emerging gap between identity and the stakeholder's perception should be solved through effective communication. For this reason, the crisis communication strategy should include the following three main objectives: first, it should explain and identify the origin of the crisis, second it should change the perception of the organization in crisis and third, it should reduce the negative affect that has been generated by the crisis (Coombs, 2007a).

An established theory in the field of crisis communication is the Situational Crisis Communication Theory by Timothy Coombs. The theory is grounded in attribution theory that states that people form their judgement based on responsibility. Built on empirical evidence, it is found that when responsibility is attributed to the organisation, it will cause negative reactions such as anger. As a consequence, it will impact the organisation in three ways: it will damage the organisation's reputation, reduce the purchase intention and cause negative word of mouth (Coombs, 2007a; Coombs, 2007b; Coombs & Holladay, 2006). When analysing SeaWorld's situation, one can conclude that the responsibility was fully attributed to SeaWorld.

In regards to handling the crisis, Coombs proposes that communication should address the problem immediately and clearly. A lack of clarity will evoke confusion amongst stakeholders and will appear as though the organization is hiding something (Coombs, 2007a). Additionally, it is argued that any information disseminated should ensure an accuracy of facts. Greyser (2009) emphasises that, if the crisis has been generated through the dissemination of false information, the rectification of the situation should be based on real facts and credible evidence. Paradoxically, when Dawn passed away, SeaWorld's communication regarding the event was often contradicting and changed several times. After *Blackfish* was released the company tried to rectify and dismiss the information spread by *Blackfish* but used mostly internal sources. Most of the external sources used to prove their point were rapidly debunked by experts due to a lack of credibility.

## Overview of Key Learning Objectives

The crisis at SeaWorld started with the death of Dawn Brancheau and grew exponentially after the release of *Blackfish*. The focus of this case study lies on the impact a crisis can have on the brand core, how this can create a gap between the brand's identity and reputation and how communication should be used to change stakeholder's perception. The presentation and discussion should therefore trigger students to evaluate the situation and its impact on the brand's identity and reputation. Additionally, it will require creative and analytical thinking in order to form an action plan that would save and restore SeaWorld's reputation. The key learnings are summarised and illustrated below in table 1.

**Table 1. Key Learning Objectives**

Key Learning Objectives		
Remember	... The circumstances and timeframe in which the crisis occurred.	SeaWorld's crisis started during a time when animal rights activism became bigger and the anti-zoo and circus movement was growing.
Understand	... The complexity of the corporate brand identity and reputation and how all elements are connected to the brand core.	As indicated, the documentary directly attacked the brand core. Therefore, multiple elements of the brand identity were affected. As the brand reputation is influenced by the brand identity elements, the impact on the brand reputation needs to be understood as well.
Apply	... Managerial decisions to save the brand's reputation.	Students will be required to consider crisis communication and reputation management strategies to successfully manage stakeholder relations and maintain a strong brand position.
Evaluate	... The brand's identity and reputation before, during and after a crisis situation.	To form managerial decisions, it is key to evaluate the situation based on theoretical concepts such as the Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix (see exhibit 2) or crisis communication strategies.
Create	An action plan for SeaWorld to respond to the moral outcry of stakeholders to save its reputation.	In regards to the communicational aspect, authenticity and consistency are key. Furthermore, the speed of response and the impact of the actions on the brand core should be considered.

# Questions

To achieve the learning objectives, it is essential that an engaging case discussion will take place. Although the professor should solely guide the discussion, it is advisable to prepare questions that allow for the learning objectives to be achieved.

Due to the complexity and length of the crisis, it is suggested to use a cascading format (see table 2). This format allows the professor to stop the crisis at its two major turning points and start an engaging discussion. The proposed format allows for the students to “live” the crisis through the eyes of a brand and/or communication manager. Additionally, it will demonstrate that a crisis is not always attributed to one big event but can unfold through various steps. Lastly, a crisis is likely to affect different stakeholder groups. A deep analysis of the environment is therefore indispensable to make the right managerial decisions.

**Table 2. Discussion Format**

<b>Event 1: The Death of Dawn Brancheau</b>	
Information given:	The students should have read the written case or the professor should present the course of events, stopping the story at the death of Dawn Brancheau. The provided information will include relevant background information about SeaWorld, its core values and promise, as well as the life of Tilikum up until that point.
Situation:	The called paramedics acknowledge the death of Dawn Brancheau. There were multiple witnesses including guests and trainers surrounding the pools during the event.
Main question:	Which actions should SeaWorld take after the death of a senior staff member?
Assisting questions:	Who are the stakeholders involved? - Witnesses, employees, family of Dawn, Tilikum  How should they relate this to the media? - What standpoint should they take? - In what format? (press release, press conference, social media)
<b>Event 2: The Release of Blackfish &amp; SeaWorld’s Future</b>	
Information given:	After the discussion, the students will be informed about the managerial decisions taken by SeaWorld after Dawn’s death. Thereupon, the documentary <i>Blackfish</i> will be introduced. The students can find relevant information in the written case although short video clips should be shown in the presentation.

Situation:	CNN has recently broadcasted the documentary on public TV. The documentary was viewed by thousands and the first negative opinions regarding SeaWorld are starting to become visible.
Main question:	What actions should SeaWorld take to save its reputation after the release of the documentary?
Assisting questions:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How has the documentary affected the brand core and which reputational aspects have been damaged the most?</li> <li>- What would be the best way to respond to the documentary and the accusations it makes?</li> <li>- What should happen with the killer whales?</li> <li>- SeaWorld will open a new park in Abu Dhabi, given the insurrection against SeaWorld, what should Manby consider when building and opening the new park?</li> </ul>

## Teaching Suggestions

Case studies provide students with the possibility to put knowledge into practice. At the same time, the guidance of the professor should ensure that the course's learning objectives are achieved. Being an interesting, emotional and engaging topic, the case study will facilitate class discussions and lead to a wide-ranging exploration. To keep it focused, this chapter aims to help the professor guide the discussion towards a balanced proactive and reactive interaction. The students should be allowed to express their viewpoints in a relaxed though guided environment. In addition, suggestions about the correct usage of the available digital and non-digital materials will be provided.

First, it is essential to create an informal climate with a good atmosphere that promotes positive interactions. This could be achieved by setting some ground rules for participation. For example, students should be asked to always motivate their argument rather than giving yes/no answers. Furthermore, the instructor needs to steer the questions and discussion to keep it on track and moving at a reasonable pace. Additionally, it should be emphasized that the analysis is a group project and that no one will be criticized for raising questions or uncertainties. This will encourage the class to share creative and bold ideas. Lastly, to create a positive climate for everyone, passive discussion participants should be asked directly in case of a few vocal students taking over the discussion.

Another fundamental aspect is the usage of the available media and technology. Instead of paper documents, PowerPoints provide an excellent opportunity to start the presentation in an engaging and more affecting way. Especially for this case study, it is recommended to display some scenes of the *Blackfish* documentary. It is believed that seeing the documentary or even scenes of it will create a stronger emotional reaction and understanding of the crisis than merely hearing about it. Besides a PowerPoint presentation, a whiteboard

should be used during and after the presentation. This will “leave a paper trail” of the discussion that students will be able to reflect upon. Additionally, it will aid the professor when summarising the main points at the end of the presentation.

While presenting, the professor should be aware of the correct usage of the physical space of the classroom. It is recommended to stand at the whiteboard while leading the discussion and come back to the centre of the room when it is time to stop the discussion and introduce new information about the case. If the case is presented by two or three professors, clear roles need to be established in advance. One should be responsible of summarising the main points on the whiteboard, another one should interact with the audience and the last one should keep track of time and lead to the next step to make sure that the case will be finished within the set time frame.

Lastly, when concluding the case study, it is advised for the professor to sum up the presentation and compare the managerial decisions taken by SeaWorld’s management with the suggestions of the students. If possible, it would be encouraged to reflect upon these points after the presentation or in the following class to see whether the students achieved the learning objectives. The summary could be done in bullet points. It is advised to not exceed 10.

## Time plan

To ensure that all content gets covered, a time plan is provided to give the instructor guidance about how much time is needed (See table 3). The current format is designed for a 40-minute lecture; however, the time can be extended to fit a longer presentation. In the case of a 2-hour presentation it could be interesting to discuss the effects of this moral crisis on the wider animal entertainment industry.

**Table 3. Time Plan**

Time	What?
3 minutes	Introduce SeaWorld
3 minutes	Start of the crisis: The death of Dawn Brancheau
10 minutes	Discussion question 1: Now that one of the Senior SeaWorld trainers has been attacked by a killer whale how should SeaWorld’s management handle the situation? Major points: - Handling of witnesses - Standpoint when facing media
6 minutes	Provide managerial decisions taken and introduce the release of <i>Blackfish</i>



10 minutes	Discussion question 2: What actions should SeaWorld take to save its reputation after the release of the documentary? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- best reaction to documentary</li> <li>- future scenarios</li> </ul>
6 minutes	Inform of the managerial decisions taken up until now: New CEO, end of Orca Show, last whale population, redesign of whale enclosures, SeaWorld in Abu Dhabi. It is advised to compare the class' decisions with that of SeaWorld's management.
2 minutes	Finish the presentation

## Board Plan

As outlined in the teaching suggestion above, one way of organising the discussion and keeping track of the main points identified by the students, is by using a board plan. Although it requires practice and planning to ensure it does not slow down the flow of the discussion, the Harvard Business School (n.d.) argues that a board with well-developed notes can “leave students with a coherent picture of the class as a whole”. To provide the instructor with a potential structure, the following board plan is proposed.

**Table 4. Board Plan**

Stakeholders	Issues	Actions
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		

As a reputational crisis involves multiple stakeholders that might require different approaches, it is advised to split the white board in three categories: Stakeholders, Issues and Actions. This allows the professor to neatly record the discussions and the student to evaluate the crisis from different perspectives. Additionally, at the end of the discussion, a short amount of time can be spent on highlighting the main actions the class agreed on by underlining them. As the presentation is given a cascading format, it is recommended to form two of such board plans, one for each event. These board plans should be formed before the start of the presentation.

## Epilogue

Mahatma Gandhi once said, “The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated” (PETA, n.d.). Four years after the release of *Blackfish*, it has become clear that the documentary has not only caused a reputational crisis for SeaWorld but also a moral outrage among the wider public. Public statements of former trainers, celebrities and animal rights activists to block SeaWorld because of the harm they inflict on animals became headlines and trends on social media. Meanwhile, the general public followed and showed their distrust by canceling their visits. This widespread moral outrage regarding animal rights has adequately been termed the “Blackfish effect” and has had a major impact on the wider animal entertainment industry (Wallace, 2016). Mexico, for example, placed a ban on using certain animals in circuses (Bland, 2015) and Feld Entertainment decided to move their circus elephants to a conservation (Ford, 2016).

This case shows the difficulty of balancing conservation and education goals with the profit-oriented thought of animal captivity. Additionally, approaching it from another perspective, the case study provides an excellent example of how a documentary can impact the identity and reputation of a brand. The extent of this crisis and diversity of actions taken, makes this topic not only worthwhile in brand and reputation management courses but can also be approached from managerial perspectives in customer relations, human resources management and communication management.

## Reflection

For the master level course Corporate Brand Management and Reputation at Lund University, each group, consisting of three students, was asked to analyse a managerial problem and transform it into a case study. The topic of the case study had to be challenging, applicable and relevant to various business contexts, and should provide the students with sufficient learning opportunities.

While discussing possible topics for this assignment, our team came up with the idea of analysing the effects of the documentary *Blackfish* on SeaWorld. Having seen the documentary ourselves, we felt that the topic would be an excellent example of a managerial problem that addressed the key leanings of the course. Professor Mats Urde, supervisor and professor of the course, agreed upon the significance of the problem and the learning opportunities it would provide. Additionally, it was decided to take the novel approach of cascading the managerial questions. As the crisis existed out of two waves of which the second was caused by the first, we felt that this set-up would minimize the complexity of the case.

The Corporate Brand Management and Reputation course placed a large focus on the corporate brand identity, the corporate reputation, stakeholder management and corporate communication. Specifically, we studied how brand management required to look both internally and externally. While the first crisis event of Dawn’s death

required management to take internal actions and deep relationship management with the affected stakeholders, the documentary release had a far greater impact and needed both internal and external actions to save SeaWorld's reputation. Touching upon the fields of corporate brand identity, corporate reputation, stakeholder management and crisis communication made us confident that this case thus embraces the main topics of the course.

In various meetings, the group discussed the topic of questioning. We initially decided to use one main question in the written case and three questions in the cascading. To test the formulated questions, a meeting with another group was held. The meeting showed that the initial questions were too complex and that the third question would not lead to additional relevant input. It was therefore decided to cut the questions down to two and also use them in the written case to not cause unwanted confusion. In addition, we got the input to use the word "action" rather than "strategy" as it was perceived less frightening and complex.

Another point of difficulty was the abundance of information. The media coverage of both Dawn's death and the release of the documentary was extensive. After hours of summing up and analyzing it became difficult to distinguish between relevant and redundant information. The team came to the conclusion that the more one knows about a topic, the harder it gets to stay objective and keep the information to its relevant minimum.

All in all, however, the group greatly enjoyed the task given and is astonished by the event in general. As a team, we feel that we have learned a lot about reputation and crisis management and got a deeper insight into brand and reputation management, even more so when writing the teaching notes and putting these into action.

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# Exhibits

Exhibit 1. The Corporate Brand Identity Matrix.

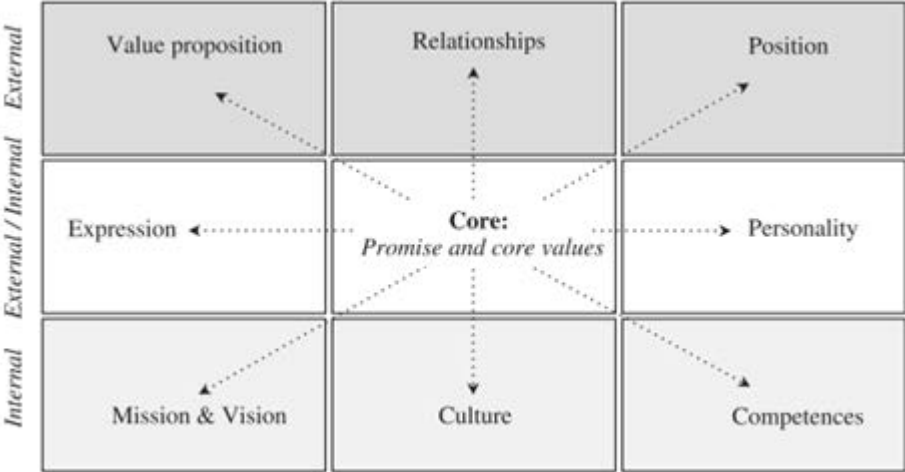


Exhibit 2. The Corporate Brand Identity and Reputation Matrix.

