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Just Window Dressing?

The Gap (RED) Campaign

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This case explores the extent to which a corporate social responsibility (CSR) campaign creates alignment between a company's mission and specific actions. It considers how tensions between the conflicting values of profits versus social ideals are common among many of today's organizations seeking to strengthen reputation and brand through CSR initiatives. The case also raises questions about CSR initiatives that increase consumerism and, in turn, produce negative impacts on society.

Sure, CSR talks the talk. But does it walk the walk? This case study takes a close look at how one CSR campaign does or does not align its words with its deeds. It is no surprise that many corporations today tout a virtuous line concerning how they care about society. It costs little to proclaim a policy of "caring for the world" and finding a fig leaf "cause" to cover the otherwise "heartless" perception of a profit-seeking company. Yet, after all, the corporation may truly be sincere. Some argue that morality resides in people, not inert corporations (Maynard, 2001), but it may just be the case that the corporate leadership earnestly believes in "doing good." To disentangle the lines of intent and to discover, if possible, the true motivation for launching a CSR campaign, this case study examines the Gap (RED) campaign.

CSR has become increasingly important as globalization becomes a central concern of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (Bronn & Vrioni, 2001; McGuire, Sundgren, & Schneeweis, 1988; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). While the social responsibility of a business was once arguably limited to increasing its profits (Friedman, 1970), today's environment suggests corporations must go beyond merely considering their profits by also accounting for the social costs and benefits of their presence around the world (Esrock & Leichty, 1998; McGuire et al., 1988; Perlmutter, 1991; Stiglitz, 2006). In Stiglitz's (2006) examination of the efficacy of globalization, he noted the vilification of the multinational corporation as "greedy, heartless entities that place profit above all else" (p. 187, also see Chua, 2004). To combat this notion, he argued that corporations must take into account how their actions impact employees, the environment, and the communities in which they operate.

Although CSR marketing has become increasingly popular, it is not a new concept. American Express began one of the first cause-related marketing campaigns in 1983. During this campaign, the Statue of Liberty restoration project received one penny for every purchase by a cardholder. American Express card usage increased 27%, card applications rose 45%, and \$1.7 million was donated to the cause. However, the Product (RED) campaign has reportedly brought CSR marketing to a new level as one of the largest consumer-based, income-generating programs by the private sector for a global humanitarian cause (Nixon, 2008). This case study suggests that in the 21st century not only is CSR a necessary component of current business practice (see Bronn & Vrioni, 2001), but it must also be communicated as a genuine gesture of truthful social consciousness and not simply a disingenuous marketing ploy. Exemplifying a global CSR effort, the U.S.-based Gap clothing retailer was one of the original participants in the Product (RED) campaign. This case examines the extent to which the Gap's participation in the Product (RED) initiative positions the company as socially accountable. Alignment between the Product (RED) mission statement and the Gap's stated objectives is investigated along with whether or not the Gap adhered to the standards it attempted to project with this campaign. Tensions between the conflicting values of profits versus social ideals will become evident. Specifically, if the Gap's (RED) products are the "right" way to manufacture clothing, why isn't all Gap merchandise manufactured in the same way? How can a company strive to achieve socially responsible ideals without putting itself at a competitive disadvantage? Do CSR campaigns such as Product (RED) obscure the connection between consumerism and its negative impacts on society?

THE (RED) CAMPAIGN

Announced in January 2006, by cofounders Bono and Bobby Shriver, the Product (RED) website (n.d.) positioned its virtue as "When you buy (RED), you save lives." According to the campaign's website, "(RED) is a business model created to raise awareness and money for The Global Fund by teaming up with well-known brands to produce (PRODUCT) RED branded products." It was created to engage the private sector, primarily consumers, in the fight against AIDS in Africa. The website clearly stated that Product (RED) was neither a charity nor a cause. It was positioned as an idea to transform the collective power of consumers into a financial force to help others in need.

Participating companies, referred to on the website as "partners," licensed the use of the Product (RED) name and produced (RED)-branded merchandise or services. These (RED) products were promoted by Product (RED) using the licensing fees collected from partners. When consumers purchased these products, a portion of the profits from the merchandise, which varied by partner, was donated to The Global Fund by the partner company. A key tenet of the campaign was that consumers did not pay extra money to purchase a (RED) product. (RED) products were priced commensurately with the cost of materials and production expenditures involved. By sacrificing a portion of its profit margin, it was the partner company that paid for the contribution to The Global Fund. The (RED) website also specifically indicated that the licensing fee did not infringe upon the amount of money donated by the partner to The Global Fund.

Funds donated by partners from the sale of (RED) products supported Global Fund programs “that positively impact the lives of people affected by HIV and AIDS in Africa. (RED) money provides access to education, nutrition, counseling, medical services, and the two pills a day individuals need to stay alive” ([RED], n.d.). As an independent financing organization governed by an international board of directors, the mission of The Global Fund, established in 2002, is to attract, manage, and disburse resources through public/private partnerships to fight AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria. According to its website, The Global Fund (n.d.) “does not implement programs directly, relying instead on a broad network of partnerships with other development organizations on the ground to supply local knowledge and technical assistance where required.” As of March 31, 2009, The Global Fund had raised over \$13 billion since its inception. Among the 44 countries listed as contributors to The Global Fund, the largest contributions were made by the United States (over \$3.3 billion), France (over \$1.7 billion), and Japan (over \$1 billion). Funds raised by NGOs totaled just under \$652 million. Within this category, itemized among 11 NGOs, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation was the largest contributor (\$450 million) followed by Product (RED) (nearly \$130 million) (The Global Fund, n.d.).

The Gap’s (RED) Mission

As of April, 2009, the link to the Gap’s (RED) website was not prominent on its retail website. Visitors in search of the Gap’s participation in the (RED) campaign had to navigate to the bottom of the main website in order to find a link labeled “Gap (PRODUCT) RED.” The link resided among others such as customer service, Gap credit cards, and terms of use. Despite being one of the initial partners in the (RED) campaign, the Gap’s (RED) website made no mention of this distinction. Within the “community” link on the Gap (RED) website, visitors were offered specifics about Gap Product (RED). The following explanation was offered:

Gap (Product) RED is about helping you make a difference in Africa. As a (Product) RED partner, we’re contributing half the profits from Gap (Product) RED products to The Global Fund, to help women and children affected by AIDS in Africa.

Further down this webpage, under the heading “Learn More About Us,” visitors were informed that the Gap’s participation in the (RED) campaign was but only one of the ways in which the Gap was committed to social responsibility. A link was provided to guide visitors to the “social responsibility” page of the Gap Inc.’s corporate website.

Gap Inc.’s Commitment to Social Responsibility

The Gap’s corporate website positioned their commitment to social responsibility as follows:

At Gap Inc., we believe we should go beyond the basics of ethical business practices and embrace our responsibility to people and to the planet. We believe this brings sustained, collective value to our shareholders, our employees, our customers and society.

The Gap defined its purpose as “to make it easy for you to express your personal style throughout your life.” Key values guiding their success were identified as “integrity, respect, open-mindedness, quality and balance.” This Purpose & Values section of their corporate website closed with this statement: “Every day, we honor these values and exemplify our belief in doing business in a socially responsible way.” Thus, on their website, the foundational ethics guiding the Gap seem to support their claims regarding CSR.

Gap (RED) Advertising

Two dedicated advertising campaigns were used to support the marketing of the Gap (RED) product line. In July 2007, the introduction of the GapKids and BabyGap (PRODUCT) RED collections were supported with a celebrity ad campaign, including an execution with Abigail Breslin and the headline “Can one kid change the world?” Other phrases in this campaign included “Every Generation Has a Voice,” “Every Generation Has a Heart,” and “Inspire The Next Generation To Change The World” (Gap Inc., 2007a).

The second dedicated ad campaign ran in November 2007, to support the 1-year anniversary of the global Gap (RED) product launch. The photography from both campaigns was provided by Annie Leibovitz, and as with the July campaign, this campaign also showcased “a diverse cast of socially conscious celebrities” (Gap Inc., 2007b). The November campaign explicitly encouraged consumers to “Do the (RED) thing,” a play on the phrase “do the right thing,” which was presumably purchasing Gap (RED) clothing. The implicit message was that by modeling the behavior of these famous individuals, the consumer would be more like these socially responsible celebrities. Conversely, if one purchased an article of clothing that was not a Gap (RED) product, then one was doing the wrong thing.

In the advertising campaigns supporting Gap (RED), an implicit trichotomy was established. In one category were the heroes, the virtuous consumers who help make a difference in Africa by trying to eliminate AIDS. According to the Gap (RED) website, the money raised by the consumer’s purchase funded health and community support programs in Africa, which can help save a person’s life. Accordingly, the implied victims in the narrative created by these ads were the Africans who suffered from the fate of AIDS. As a propaganda technique, often the struggle between good and bad is initiated by the introduction of victims (Conway, Grabe, & Grieves, 2007). Hence, if the Gap and other like-minded consumers were the heroes trying to help the African victims, then the “bad guys” were those competitive retailers who did not offer socially conscious products and those other consumers who chose not to purchase (RED) products.

Normative points of view were advanced by the use of the virtuous/villainous role-players (Conway et al., 2007) and the “Do the (RED) thing” tagline. The message advanced by the Gap (RED) advertising was normatively situational because its logic worked only in specific situations. When consumers wanted to purchase a T-shirt, they had the option of buying one from the Gap (RED) product line that aided Africans. However, moving past T-shirts, the consumers’ choices to “do the right thing” became limited. What if the consumer wanted to purchase a pair of shorts? Defenders of this promotion used the operative word *when*. *When* the consumer had the choice between a Gap (RED) product and a non-(RED) product, the choice was easy (Nixon, 2008). Contemplating further the notion of “do the right thing,”

this line of argument also became problematic for the Gap's entire business model. If doing the right thing was purchasing a Gap (RED) product, then why wasn't all Gap merchandise following the (RED) business model? It is here where the Gap's seemingly duty-based ethics system is apparently situational rather than foundational.

HAS THE CAMPAIGN SUCCEEDED IN ITS GOALS?

For the partners, one of the purposes of the (RED) campaign was to distinguish them from their competitors, which was facilitated by the exclusivity of the licensing arrangement (High, 2007). To be sure, the ad campaign's attempt to implicitly classify the world into good versus bad offers confirmation of this goal. Participating in Product (RED) allowed the Gap to portray their products as the socially conscious choice in the retail clothing marketplace.

Aside from competitive distinction, another explicit goal of the Gap (RED) campaign, broadly defined on the Gap Product (RED) website (n.d.), was to "help eliminate AIDS in Africa." However, because no financial goal was publicly established, one cannot determine whether or not this goal was met. Furthermore, beyond indicating that 50% of the profit from product (RED) merchandise was donated to the campaign, no specific figures were provided about the profit margin of the Gap's products. Thus, it is impossible to calculate just how much money was donated from the sale of a \$25 T-shirt. While a donation to The Global Fund of \$2 million to \$2.5 million was estimated by a Gap spokesperson in January 2007 (Spethmann, 2007), little in the way of financial specifics was otherwise offered. In fact, the only figures provided by the Gap corporate website came in the abstract form of the number of African women and children who *could be* treated with annual antiretroviral drugs for AIDS as a result of the funds raised from Gap (RED) products (Gap Inc., 2005–2006). While the aggregated amount of contributions from the (Product) RED campaign in general was provided, the individual contribution from the Gap's participation was not. Hence, to the degree that a single dollar raised by the Gap's participation in this effort constitutes a contribution to eliminating AIDS in Africa, then this loosely stated goal was met.

The Gap's most recently available CSR report provides additional details about the goals of the Gap's participation in the (RED) campaign. Recognizing that "donations alone are unlikely to resolve the major challenges faced by developing nations," the report cited the (RED) campaign as a means for their company to create a reliable stream of revenue "that will be complementary to, but far exceed the well-intended but insufficient contributions from corporate philanthropy budgets" in the fight against AIDS in Africa (Gap Inc., 2005–2006, p. 81). Thus, to the admittedly limited degree that it is helpful, the Gap was committed to Africa on an ongoing basis—on numerous levels that will be addressed in more depth later. Continuing participation in the (RED) campaign as of this writing, in March 2011, suggests the Gap is succeeding in meeting this goal.

Another reported goal of the campaign was to raise consumer awareness about AIDS in Africa. The Gap contends that they were "engaging consumers on a critical global issue and encouraging them to become part of the solution" (Gap Inc., 2005–2006, p. 81). Using generalities to cite the quantity of inventory that had been sold as well as the publicity generated by celebrities who had endorsed the effort, their *Social Responsibility Report* stated,

"We've been very pleased and inspired by the way our customers have embraced this movement" (Gap Inc., 2005–2006, p. 81). Definitively establishing that consumer awareness was raised as a result of the Gap's participation in the (RED) campaign necessitated quantitative research utilizing pre- and post-campaign measures. If the Gap had collected this sort of information, they did not make it available for scrutiny. Thus, it was not possible to determine success on this measure either.

Finally, and most interestingly, the Gap identified establishing "ethical trade" as a goal of the (RED) campaign. The Gap indicated that, while portions of their (RED) merchandise were manufactured in Africa, the current suppliers were unable to meet the demands of their entire product line. They stated the following:

We are actively partnering with our approved manufacturers in Lesotho and other sub-Saharan countries to help them improve their production capabilities. It's a start —and our hope is that this work will help them attract more business and ultimately build vibrant, thriving economies. (Gap Inc., 2005–2006, p. 81)

Indeed, improving factory conditions was addressed on the Gap Inc. website with references to examining their business practices and how they impact labor standards.

To determine whether this goal of "ethical trade" is mere lip service or whether sincere efforts have been made, a look at reports from Labour Behind the Label was useful. This independent organization, based in the United Kingdom, has supplied research from a coalition of development agencies, labor rights groups, and trade unions revealing what efforts garment industry companies made to improve working conditions among their suppliers. Among more than 30 retailers surveyed in 2006, the Gap was one of two companies placed in Labour Behind the Label's top performing category: "Pulling ahead." The 2006 report stated, "While they still have a long way to go, they seem to be engaging more seriously with the issues we raised" (Hearson, 2006). The 2007 report concluded, "Gap remains one of the most progressive fashion brands when it comes to labour rights" (Hearson & Morser, 2007). However, the competition was regarded as not being particularly tough, and the Gap was noted for making seemingly little progress on its commitments in the previous 12 months. Nonetheless, the report praised the Gap for its collaborative approach with trade unions, NGOs, and other brands and retailers, indicating their tactic "is just what is needed if working conditions across the sector are to improve" (Hearson & Morser, 2007). Again in 2008, the Gap was noted as one of only two retailers in the report's top category that publicly committed to a project containing all four of Labour Behind the Label's pillars of a good living wages initiative: (1) a collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach; (2) worker organizing and participation; (3) examining commercial factors throughout the whole supply chain; and (4) a clear route-map to implementing the living wage for all workers (Hearson, 2008). The positive evaluation of the Gap continued in 2009, earning one of the highest report ratings for plans that "remain impressive in depth, with research completed and work now planned in seven countries. It is the one company to ensure that trade union rights are central to its plans" (McMullen & Maher, 2009). It was noted, however, that the implementation of their plans to improve wages needs to progress more quickly. These annual reports from Labour Behind the Label suggest the Gap was sincere and was making progress in its efforts to achieve "ethical trade."

Is Gap (RED) Window Dressing?

Because it was identified as a business model rather than a cause, the Product (RED) campaign was positioned to have staying power as a marketing strategy. Instead of being a one-time, short-term event, (RED) partners were committed for at least 5 years (Spethmann, 2007). The duration of the commitment to (RED) made partners, including the Gap, less open to accusations of being less than genuine in their commitment to social responsibility.

Attempting to create increased awareness of the AIDS epidemic facing Africa on an ongoing basis rather than through a one-shot promotion was a commendable and challenging endeavor. However, Nickel and Eickenberry (2009) raised concerns about the increasing conflation of consumption, media celebration, and philanthropy. They defined the notion of "consumption philanthropy" as occurring when one purchases a service or product because of a perceived association with a charitable aspect. Increasing awareness of, and dependence on, philanthropic giving to address communal problems has not allowed philanthropy to achieve its desired transformational potential, they argued. Instead, marketized philanthropy reframes the dominant discourse by reducing the ability to recognize the connection between the marketplace and the negative impacts it has on human well-being. They believe that "marketized philanthropy is an especially insidious case because it creates the appearance of giving back, disguising the fact that it is already based in taking away" (Nickel & Eickenberry, 2009, p. 975). In isolation, the Gap's participation in the (RED) campaign is suspect from this perspective.

From their *Social Responsibility Report*, the Gap was clearly aware that social responsibility is "a new theme in today's marketplace" (Gap Inc., 2005–2006). They also recognized the awakening of consumer consciousness on this issue as well as the power of the media in drawing attention to companies' both admirable and unworthy practices. In fact, noted Maynard (2001), it is often this media attention that is most effective in policing the ethical behavior of transnational conduct. He contended that it is public exposure and the mission-statement mentality that drives a corporation to create a distinct image favoring moral behavior. Furthermore, the Gap freely admits that they knew from past experiences "the power that celebrities can bring to marketing campaigns" (Gap Inc., 2005–2006). Thus, an argument can be made that the Gap was well aware of the scrutiny they were opening themselves up to by participating in the (RED) campaign. Not only was the international music celebrity Bono the spokesman, but the Gap actually elicited additional attention by supporting their (RED) efforts with celebrities in their own advertisements. To the degree that this attention was elicited to increase sales, it was, of course, a marketing strategy. It defies the marketing "gimmick" label in that it went beyond having little relevance or use. With the glare of the media spotlight came the scrutiny from those ready to expose illegitimate claims to social responsibility.

Another useful resource in considering the legitimacy of the Gap's claims to social responsibility was the ethical reputation reports offered by Covalence, a Geneva, Switzerland-based company. Using thousands of documents from the media, enterprise, NGOs, and other sources, Covalence provides a reputation index based upon criteria including labor standards, waste management, product social utility, and human rights policies (Covalence, 2008). Twenty multinational companies (MNCs) were analyzed in each of 10 major sectors totaling approximately 200 companies classified as the largest market

capitalizations in the Dow Jones World Index. Covalence provides annual rankings of the top 10 performing companies in each of three categories across all analyzed sectors. That the Gap was even included in the Covalence analysis suggests the degree of international media attention was significant, lending credence to the argument that the Gap endured considerable public scrutiny.

Covalence's "Best EthicalQuote Score" established the amount of published positive minus negative news cumulated from 2002 through 2007. Among the 20 companies within the retail sector, the Gap was ranked fifth in 2005 (Covalence, 2006), third in 2006 (Covalence, 2007), and third in 2007 (Covalence, 2008). As an absolute measure of ethical popularity, these data suggest the Gap was a leading company on ethical reputation in the retail sector by the standards of Covalence.

While data were collected for the calendar year 2008, the methodology for calculating its EthicalQuote score and rankings was revised by Covalence (Covalence, 2009), making comparison to previous years' data not possible. This illustrates another challenge facing the assessment of social responsibility: how the concept of CSR is operationalized and measured (Esrock & Leichty, 1998; Maignan & Ralston, 2002; McGuire et al., 1988; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). Indeed, individual firms exist, such as Covalence, which measure particular aspects of social responsibility. Furthermore, shareholder activists as well as special interest groups, like Labour Behind the Label, have their own metrics for monitoring social responsibility. But for many in corporate industry, such as Gabriella Morris, president of the Prudential Foundation, "there continue to be no good metrics in the field. Major reason, it is difficult to nearly impossible to develop objective data on accountability measures" (personal communication, April 10, 2009). In 2009, researching all the metrics of CSR was a project in itself. Finding metrics that were internationally accepted was not possible.

For other critics, it was not the authenticity of socially responsible campaigns that was problematic but the aid generated in and of itself. For Dr. Dambisa Moyo, a Zambian economist, foreign aid was bad for Africa and bad for Africans because it "keeps Africa in a supplicant's role when its governments need to become self-sufficient" (Miller, 2009). Celebrity endorsements perpetuated the dependency relationship through negative stereotyping, argued Moyo. "Instead of aid, Moyo recommends other paths to financial and democratic independence: bond issues, trade, foreign investment" (Miller, 2009). Moyo's perspective lends a particularly credible argument against the legitimacy of the Gap's (RED) campaign.

Before writing off the campaign in its entirety as window dressing, however, one ought to examine its merits in a larger context. To Moyo's points of trade and foreign investment as means to self-sufficiency for Africa, one must keep in mind one of the three publicly stated goals of the Gap's (RED) campaign: the need for ethical trade. The Gap was committed to the long-term economic development of Lesotho, a sub-Saharan African kingdom of 2 million where manufacturing accounted for approximately 75% of its total exports (Gap Inc., 2005–2006). The following was explained in the Gap's *Social Responsibility Report*:

We advocated for the U.S. Government to pass the African Growth and Opportunities Act (AGOA), which provides preferential trading arrangements for apparel products from Lesotho into the U.S. market. We also began working with Lesotho's government, business leaders and factory workers to enhance the apparel industry's technical capabilities and responsible labor practices. (Gap Inc., 2005–2006, p. 79)

These actions demonstrate efforts to promote ethical trade. Combined with (1) the Gap's long-term commitment to the (RED) campaign; (2) its goal of increasing awareness of the AIDS epidemic in Africa, which thereby increases scrutiny of its own practices; and (3) its comparatively high ethical reputation standings in the apparel industry, all of these considerations suggest that the Gap's participation in the (RED) campaign went beyond mere window dressing.

VERDICT

In isolation, the Gap (RED) campaign was about leveraging social responsibility for capitalistic enterprise. Yet, as its website pointed out, the (RED) campaign was but one of many components in the Gap's commitment to CSR. Because dismantling the U.S. capitalistic system is unrealistic, an alternative is to operate within the existing system in as socially responsible a manner as possible. Rhetoric in support of this agenda should be critically examined to determine its legitimacy. As a start, one must look to the companies that, under public scrutiny, are genuinely committed to social change.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why would some argue that the Gap exemplifies an ethical organization? Why would others disagree?
2. What do you think the Gap needs to do to dispel criticisms of its (RED) campaign participation?
3. Why does the author argue that Gap (RED) ads are problematic? What do you think?
4. What might be a better ad campaign?
5. How can companies like the Gap strive to achieve socially responsible ideals without putting themselves at a competitive disadvantage? Is there a way to follow a "moral universalist" approach (Maynard, 2001) without falling victim to moral relativism necessitated in a competitive marketplace?
6. Can you think of other examples of cause marketing? Which were successful and which were not? Why? How is "success" defined?

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