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The Lands’ End Content Marketing Debacle: A Cautionary Tale of a Retailer’s Inadvertent Foray into Polarized Politics

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Abstract

In February 2016, the clothing retailer Lands’ End found itself at the center of a public relations crisis linked to its decision to feature an interview with women’s rights activist Gloria Steinem on the company’s website and in its catalog. As part of a new “Legends Series” of interviews, the profile described Steinem as “The woman who paved the way.” Although the piece didn’t directly reference Steinem’s support for abortion rights, many customers took to social media to express anger at Lands’ End for choosing to feature Steinem. Facebook and Twitter posts accused Lands’ End of glorifying “a pro-abortion feminist” and ignoring the views of its “family friendly” customer base. Along with boycott calls from consumers, several Christian and Catholic schools threatened to end school uniform contracts with Lands’ End due to the “pro-abortion agenda” touted in the company’s catalog. Lands’ End quickly removed the interview from its website, and issued an apology explaining the profile series was meant to honor pioneering individuals and that the company had not intended “to take

any political or religious stance.” Instead of ending the controversy, however, Lands’ End quickly found it had newly angered many consumers on the opposite end of the political spectrum. Social media backlash and calls to boycott came from those who supported Steinem and her politics. Along with analysis of the Lands’ End case, the chapter discusses relevant academic literature and highlights other recent cases in which companies, intentionally and unintentionally, have become ensnared in highly charged political debates.

Introduction

In late February of 2016, the iconic clothing retailer Lands’ End found itself embroiled in a self-inflicted public relations firestorm. The company, long known for its mail-order catalogue business, customer service, and high-quality fashion basics, was facing angry calls for boycotts from customers on social media — and a wave of negative headlines from news outlets eager to report on the retailer’s embarrassing marketing misstep. The backlash was in response to an interview with author and feminist activist Gloria Steinem, conducted by the company’s chief executive officer Federica Marchionni, which appeared on the retailer’s web site and within its newly released spring fashion catalogue. Conservative customers expressed dismay that the company had featured a controversial feminist icon known for her long history of activism and support for abortion rights. In an attempt to end controversy and quickly quell consumer anger, the retailer immediately removed the Steinem content from its web site and issued a carefully worded apology stressing it had not intended to cause offense. Instead of defusing the situation, however, the apology caused a new wave of customer backlash and angry posts to social media, this time from shoppers who supported Steinem and her liberal politics. The damage to the Lands’ End brand was done, and instead of refreshing the classic retailer’s somewhat stodgy image, it seemed the company had only succeeded in disappointing and angering a wide spectrum of its core customer base.

Background

Lands’ End was originally founded in Chicago in 1963 as a yachting equipment supply business, with casual clothing representing just a small fraction of its products. The company was an innovator in the mail-order industry, by creating catalogues with compelling visuals and detailed and appealing product descriptions, quickly shipping orders to customers, and offering shoppers a flexible and “unconditional” return policy (About Us, 2016, para. 5). As the company became more successful, it narrowed its product focus to clothing and luggage and, in 1978, moved its business operations to the small town of Dodgeville, Wisconsin. Becoming a publicly traded company in 1986, Lands’ End expanded internationally during the 1990s and became an early adopter of internet retailing with the launch of LandsEnd.com in 1995 (Corporate Overview, 2016). In 2002, the company was purchased by Sears (CNN Money, 2002), a move that put Lands’ End-branded clothing in hundreds of Sears retail stores across the country. In 2013, suffering profitability challenges, the Sears Holding Corporation elected to spin off Lands’ End into a separate publicly traded company (Malcolm, 2013). Today the company’s top three competitors include L.L. Bean, Eddie Bauer, and J.C. Penney (Hoovers, 2016).

Along with its web site offering a variety of clothing for women, men and kids, and home furnishings, today the company generates revenue from its standalone retail Lands’ End Inlet Stores located across the country, as well as its Business Outfitters workplace apparel and School Uniform web sites (Corporate Overview, 2016). Important to this case study, the company’s sales of school uniforms to private (and often religious) educational institutions represents a significant percentage of the retailer’s business (Bukspan, 2016); the company partners with thousands of private schools by offering customized web sites that assist parents in shopping for school uniforms, and an incentive program that gives participating institutions a three percent cash back payment on the net sales of their school’s uniforms (Corporate Overview, 2016).

Following separation from Sears, Lands' End has suffered declining sales and a significant reduction in its stock value (Romell, 2015c). In early 2015 the retailer hired a new Italian-born CEO, Federica Marchionni, who previously served as an executive for the Dolce & Gabbana luxury fashion house (Romell, 2015c). News articles described her plans to seek cost efficiencies in the company's operations and to reinvigorate the brand and increase its relevance with a move toward trendier, "more-fashion-forward" clothes (Romell, 2015b). Shortly after Marchionni started, media reports questioned the "fit" between the high-fashion Italian executive and her management style, and the more traditional Midwestern brand and corporate culture of Lands' End. Articles specifically noted Marchionni's decision to maintain her primary residence in New York City, and to regularly fly back and forth between New York and Wisconsin for meetings and major corporate events, versus moving with her family to the 4,700-person town of Dodgeville, home to most of the company's employees (Romell, 2015a; Kapner, 2016).

Situation — The Gloria Steinem Controversy

Sent to customers in late February, among descriptions of its latest clothes and fashionable pictures depicting well-dressed models enjoying a fancy Easter-themed picnic, the Spring 2016 Lands' End catalogue featured a multi-page photo spread and interview with the headline, "Gloria Steinem, The Woman Who Paved the Way." Next to a photo of a smiling Steinem wearing Lands' End clothing, the page announced: "Introducing the Legend Series, our ode to individuals who have made a difference in both their respective industries and the world at large. We honor them and thank them for paving the way for the many who follow" (Faircloth, 2016). The company's web site also featured the interview and photos of Steinem, labeling the section as, "A Conversation with Federica Marchionni, CEO." As multiple news reports noted, the published interview, which included a photo of Marchionni and Steinem sitting and talking together, did not discuss or mention the topic of abortion but, rather, focused on challenges women encounter in the workplace (Halzack, 2016) and Steinem's long-standing support for the Equal Rights Amendment, a proposed change to the constitution to "expressly prohibit discrimination against girls and women on the basis of sex" (ERA Coalition, 2016, para.1). The feature also advertised a promotion allowing customers to add an embroidered ERA Coalition logo to Lands' End products, with the company then donating proceeds to the non-profit organization.

Outcomes / Key Factors

Online backlash from conservative consumers was almost immediate. Media reports described the flood of angry comments posted to the Lands' End Facebook page, with consumers expressing outrage at the company's decision to feature Steinem and calling for a boycott of the brand. Most articles included a sampling of negative social media posts. The *Washington Post*, for example, described the backlash against Lands' End as "swift and intense," and included a series of Facebook posts in its story (Bukszpan, 2016):

"You obviously don't know who shops with you, or maybe you do and don't care," wrote one shopper on Facebook. "In the midst of the celebration of Easter (life), you interview and glorify a woman who fosters a culture of death."

"Those of us who love family, love children, are completely puzzled why you would promote a very vocal pro-abortion celebrity," wrote another. "Is this who you are LandsEnd? Are you anti-child?"

"How could you not understand that your family-friendly customer base does not want to see a rabidly pro-abortion woman (Steinem) honored as a hero?"

Dozens of major media outlets reported on the controversy, including *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *NBC News*, *Forbes*, *Fortune*, and *The Guardian*. Most articles also included at least a portion of the formal apology statement Lands' End issued in response to the customers who had complained about the Steinem piece:

We understand that some of our customers were offended by the inclusion of an interview in a recent catalog with Gloria Steinem on her quest for women's equality. We thought it was a good idea and we heard from our customers that, for different reasons, it wasn't. For that, we sincerely apologize. Our goal was to feature individuals with different interests and backgrounds that have made a difference for our new Legends Series, not to take any political or religious stance.

Other articles referenced a similar message, with slightly different wording (see Appendix A), which was posted on the same day to the Lands' End corporate Facebook page. The tone of the Lands' End statements reads as contrite, apologetic and deferential. Perhaps predictably, however, many consumers who backed Steinem were quick to express their own anger at what they viewed as the cowardly decision Lands' End had made to distance itself from Steinem and her politics. Much of same media coverage included samples of social media posts from users who were irate that the company had deleted the interview from its site and apologized for its association with the feminist activist (Halzack, 2016).

"What a terrible message to send to all the women and girls who wear your clothes," one Facebook commenter wrote. "I'm sorry you see equal rights for women as a divisive issue. I see it as a human issue."

Many articles highlighted social media posts from consumers declaring that they would never again shop at Lands' End, with declarations that they and their families would instead be taking their business to other retailers:

"I don't intend to teach my children that anyone should do business with a company that is ashamed to even talk about feminism."

"You see equal rights as a divisive issue? Thanks for letting me know not to give you my money."

"Dear [@LandsEnd](#), my kids know Gloria Steinem is a heroine, and they're also going to know why they're no longer wearing your clothes."

"Lands' End will never get another dollar from our family. Poorly done, [@LandsEnd](#) [@LandsEndPR](#) [#landsend](#) steinem"

In deciding not to stand behind its original marketing content, although the company attempted to apologize and de-politicize its actions, analysis shows that Lands' End placed itself in a "lose-lose" public relations position. In examining this case study, it is important to explore ethical consideration along with the various factors that may have motivated these choices. How could such a well-respected company make such clumsy and seemingly ill-considered decisions?

Declining Sales, a CEO/Company Culture Clash and the Private School Uniform Factor

Leading up to the Steinem controversy, Marchionni was quoted as citing a "challenging retail environment" and "a lack of product acceptance" as among several factors that had contributed to the company's decreased earnings and recent loss of stock value (Romell, 2015c). Reporting on the company's fourth consecutive disappointing earnings report, retail industry journalists noted that Marchionni was attempting to "tweak the brand's image" to better attract a younger and more fashion-focused clientele, while retaining the more traditional Lands' End shopper (Romell, 2015; Bhasin, 2015). Along with trendier clothing options (Cheng, 2016), the new Legends Series of interviews with pioneering individuals was part of Marchionni's attempt to generate attention and increase the relevance of the brand.

Upon her hire as CEO, observers had noted Marchionni's background in high fashion and its stylistic contrast with the more down-to-earth Lands' End image. However, news coverage emerging after the Steinem

controversy unfolded revealed evidence of deeper tensions, including poor internal communication and a culture clash between Marchionni and some of the company's Wisconsin-based executives and employees (Romell, 2016c). One article, which relied heavily on anonymous quotes from current and former Lands' End employees, referenced Marchionni's decision to remain based in New York as contributing to colleagues' questioning of the executive's understanding of "Midwestern" culture — and depicted an atmosphere of toxic office politics, with Marchionni described derisively by one former colleague as "a princess," and her business demeanor and management style compared to the icy Meryl Streep character from the film "The Devil Wears Prada" (Romell, 2016c). Marchionni, who was described by anonymous employees as being impatient and often unwilling or uninterested in hearing dissenting ideas, is alternately quoted in the piece describing issues of stagnancy and complacency within the company (Romell, 2016c). It is perhaps an open question as to whether tensions among executives or poor communication served to hamper strategic dialogue in the development of the Legends Series initiative, and key discussions related to the decision to feature a polarizing and controversial figure like Steinem to inaugurate the series. One could also question whether a cultural disconnect — between the New York City-based CEO and the company's Midwestern employees, or between Marchionni and the more traditional (i.e., conservative) Lands' End customer base — helped to create a situation in which the benefits and risks of the Steinem interview were not fully considered.

With a professional marketing and corporate communications team on staff, it is implausible that at least some within Lands' End didn't anticipate negative feedback in the lead-up to the Steinem interview. As a public figure, Steinem has been involved in controversial politics for decades, and today's often highly charged social media environment allows anyone to easily voice opinion. While likely expecting some resentment from a segment of customers opposed to Steinem's politics, as is evident in the company's statements the Lands' End communication team was seemingly caught off guard by both the volume of angry responses from conservative customers and the antipathy many held toward Steinem.

However perhaps the most influential factor in the company's decision to make such a hasty public reversal and apology for its honoring of Steinem was the coordinated response and public calls for boycotts from the religious and parochial school community. In particular, many news articles covering the controversy referenced two private Christian schools in Missouri, the College of the Ozarks and Father Tolton Regional Catholic High School, which had both announced they had "ended their relationship with Lands' End" due to the Steinem interview (Berry, 2016; Schlossberg, 2016). Coverage from a Columbia, Missouri television station reported that administrators from Tolton Catholic High School had sent a letter to parents announcing that it would no longer use Lands' End as its official uniform provider because of its alliance with Steinem, "an advocate for abortion rights" (Quick, 2016). An excerpt of the letter, which was also posted to the school's Facebook page, read: "We believe unequivocally that all life is sacred, from conception until natural death. It would be contrary to our school's very identity to support a company who celebrates the work of someone so opposed to our beliefs" (Quick, 2016). The story also quotes the regional Catholic diocese of Jefferson City (MO) as supporting the school's decision to cut ties with Lands' End, and encouraging the dozens of other elementary and high schools within its region "to be aware of the situation" when making future decisions regarding uniform company selection (Quick, 2016).

While the initial backlash Lands' End faced for the Steinem interview may have been isolated to a handful of religious schools — which were fast to publicize their discontent via social media posts and traditional media interviews — the company's quick decision to apologize and disassociate itself from Steinem was likely motivated by a larger concern that the trend of schools canceling uniform contracts might spread exponentially throughout national networks of Catholic and Christian schools. For Lands' End, the potential loss of a significant portion of its school uniform business due to offended members of the religious community likely far outweighed the reputational costs and damage to the brand image caused by backtracking on its support for

Steinem. While time, and future sales, will reveal the business implications of its decision, perhaps more up for debate are the ethical considerations, for Lands' End — and other companies — striving to remain relevant and win over today's consumers, while also avoiding "any political or religious stance."

Appendix A

Alternate wording of apology statement, posted to the Lands' End corporate Facebook page:

Some customers were troubled and concerned that we featured an interview with Gloria Steinem in a recent catalog. Lands' End is committed to providing our loyal customers and their families with stylish, affordable, well-made clothing. We greatly respect and appreciate the passion people have for our brand. It was never our intention to raise a divisive political or religious issue, so when some of our customers saw the recent promotion that way, we heard them. We sincerely apologize for any offense.

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Questions and Answers

Question #1:

Is it “ethical” for a company to become involved with controversial social and political issues, such as (support or opposition toward) abortion, LGBT rights, or gay-marriage? What are some of the key factors a company should consider before wading into politics? (Alternate framing of this question: Is it ever *unethical* for a company to remain “neutral,” or to refuse to take any sort of stance on a specific political or social issue?)

Potential “answers” or discussion angles: Discuss various possible risks and benefits of connecting a brand to a controversial issue, ranging from the creation of customer affinity and loyalty — to negative headlines, angry employees and public calls for boycotts, etc.

Question #2:

Today more and more companies and corporate CEOs are choosing to take a stand on controversial social issues, or to become involved in charged political debates. Noteworthy recent examples include Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz and the company’s #RaceTogether campaign, Apple CEO Tim Cook’s public support of LGBT rights, and Target Corporation’s bathroom policy for transgender customers. With this trend in mind, is there ever an ethical imperative for companies (especially publicly traded, stockholder-owned firms) to *avoid* polarizing political controversies which could alienate customers and potentially harm sales and profits? Or, alternatively, should corporate executives always feel compelled to “do what’s right” in offering their company’s support (or opposition) for political causes, regardless of the potential negative implications to profits and stock price, etc.?

Potential “answers” or discussion angles: Discussion should cover the inherent challenge of the “do what’s right” idea, especially related to complex and evolving social issues — and in circumstances when not everyone in the company feels the same way, or agrees with its CEO.

Related Teaching Resource: <http://www.webershandwick.com/uploads/news/files/the-dawn-of-ceo-activism.pdf>

Question #3:

Following a major public relations misstep like the Gloria Steinem controversy, how can a company such as Lands’ End work to gain support and win back customers who were angered by previous marketing decisions? What unique risks and benefits might tools like social media hold in pursuing this effort?

Potential “answers” or discussion angles: Discussion could include brainstorming of ideas, such as loyalty programs, targeted incentive promotions, and earned media strategies, etc. The “two-way” and uncontrolled nature of social media should be emphasized, especially related to activist consumers’ ability to leave comments and create posts — and strategically use social media content to recreate controversy and generate (traditional) media attention for their own cause.

Question #4:

Specifically related to the notion of business ethics, is there really such a thing as “Corporate Values”? What does it mean for a company to have strong values, and how can an organization demonstrate its values in a way that is both truly genuine and generally perceived positively and as authentic by various publics? What role should employees and consumers play in determining a company’s values?

Potential “answers” or discussion angles: Conversation could include discussion of different types of CSR initiatives, connections to the business/industry, and the risks and benefits (to reputation, brand recognition, customer loyalty, etc.) related to the strategic adoption of Corporate Social Advocacy campaigns.

Question #5:

Following the Steinem controversy, Lands’ End CEO Marchionni was quoted in an interview (“The Power of Sorry,” appearing June 27, 2016, in *Marie Claire*) saying that as part of an attempt to raise awareness, Lands’ End “took a stance to support women’s equality” — and that the company was surprised by the negative response from both sides of the abortion debate. Discussing the company’s apology, the CEO said, “... we never intended

to raise that (abortion) issue.” Can social and political issues be *separated* in this manner? Alternately, is there such a thing as controversy-free corporate involvement in politics? What are the key factors involved?

<http://www.marieclaire.com/career-advice/news/a21231/lands-end-ceo-federica-marchionni-explains-gloria-steinem/>

Potential “answers” or discussion angles: Discussion should emphasize the fact that audiences (i.e., publics) determine their own perceptions related to the interconnectedness of political and social issues, and that companies and organizations often have little control over how publics will perceive or interpret information, or react to politically charged material. Among important factors to consider, conversation may focus on evolving cultural norms, class, educational and regional differences, and tensions between traditional religious belief systems and secularism among different audiences.

Declaration

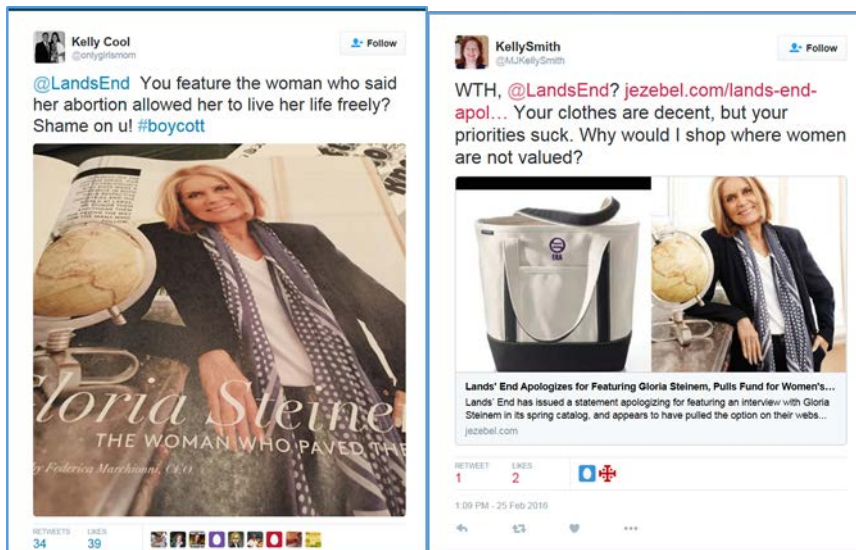
I would like to acknowledge and thank Marquette University College of Communication graduation student Ashley Krysik, who served as a research assistant for this project and helped in identifying key references and locating many of the relevant news articles used in this case study.

Keywords

Public Relations; Corporate Communication; Crisis Communication; Issues Management; Reputation Management; Social Media; Corporate Social Responsibility; Corporate Social Advocacy; Political Communication; Retail Industry

Possible Illustrations or Figures

A sampling of social media posts from angry consumers (from both sides of the issue)



A web site “screen grab” of the open-letter to Lands’ End from the College of the Ozarks:



HBO comedian John Oliver produced a segment focused on the Lands' End controversy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dz8oKlIgNtE>



Additional social media examples from the controversy:

Opposing Steinem

“Still can't figure out why you think a 80 year old woman who wears a tee shirt celebrating abortion is a good face for your brand -- especially among the young people you so hope to attract -- polls consistently show people age 18-29 are more pro-life than their elders. Maybe your new CEO should move from New York to Wisconsin -- she might meet some people who actually buy the clothes Land's End sells. Unfortunately, my family won't be among them as we are done with Land's End”

“We won't be purchasing from you any longer. Our family is *not* ok with your donations to an organization that supports abortion. No way. Really a shame. I have four kids, by the way, and you were my go-to place for coats and pajamas. Bye-bye. I will take my business elsewhere.”

Supporting Steinem

“Land's End now gets to be known as the anti-woman clothing company. Folks, we have so many other companies to choose.”

“WTH, @LandsEnd? <http://jezebel.com/lands-end-apologizes-for-featuring-gloria-steinem-pull-1761229657> ... Your clothes are decent, but your priorities suck. Why would I shop where women are not valued?”

