



SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment ‘Blackfish’ Crisis An Assessment of ‘Blackfish’ Effect on SeaWorld

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Abstract

SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment, Inc. is fighting for its survival post 'Blackfish', a documentary focusing on killer whale, Tilikum, involved in the death of three people, and inhumane treatment of orcas by the marine park. With an 84 percent drop in profits, celebrity criticism and widespread social media backlash, this crisis has now become a valid threat for SeaWorld. New CEO, Joel Manby, is working hard to win back the trust of the public and investors through multifaceted marketing campaign. This case study analyzes public response, 'Blackfish' effect on business, and SeaWorld's attempt at reviving its' former glory.

Overview

SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment, Inc. crisis began with the screening of the controversial documentary 'Blackfish', directed by Gabriela Cowperthwaite, in 2013. The documentary focuses on the death of former SeaWorld trainer Dawn Brancheau by an orca, Tilikum, held captive by SeaWorld, and another controversy over the captivity of killer whales. The backlash from the documentary led to decline in attendance and raised concerns among the marine-theme park investors. In 2013, SeaWorld's attendance fell by four percent and the price of its shares was cut in half in a year (Mochari, 2014). According to the Wall Street Journal, "The company acknowledges that the fallout of Blackfish--which it says is a work of propaganda--is hitting attendance (Mochari, 2014, para 7)." However, Dawn Brancheau's family released a statement and former trainer, Mark Simmons, who was part of the documentary, in numerous interviews backed SeaWorld, and called the documentary inaccurate.

Following the crisis, SeaWorld has taken an aggressive approach to reputation management by launching various campaigns to tell their version of the story. The marine park through these new campaigns is providing facts about its animal care efforts and "outlines its multimillion-dollar deal investments in killer whale research" (Daniels, 2015). By the end of 2015, SeaWorld also announced that they would phase out its iconic 'Shamu' Show in its San Diego park in 2016 and launch a new orca presentation by 2017. "The new show will demonstrate how whales behave in the wild, with a focus on conservation efforts," said SeaWorld CEO Joel Manby (Los Angeles Times, 2015). People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), which is campaigning against SeaWorld for years now, did not support the decision and called on the park to release its whales into ocean sanctuaries. "This move is like no longer whipping lions in a circus act but keeping them locked in cages for life," said PETA, Director of Animal Law Jared Goodman (Los Angeles Times, 2015).

With the change of guard at SeaWorld, the announcement of the end of 'Shamu Show' and filing of a lawsuit against the California Coastal Commission over ban on the breeding of orcas, SeaWorld has now begun its journey on the road to recovery. However, what remains to be seen is if it can survive the blows of animal activists and the general public who want them to release the whales into ocean sanctuaries. The 'Blackfish' crisis has raised a question on whether animal parks such as SeaWorld have the right to hold wild animals' captive for entertainment?

Company Background

History of SeaWorld

Based on SeaWorld official website, SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment, Inc. was founded in 1964 by George Millay, Milt Shedd, Ken Norris and David Demott. The four friends originally planned an underwater restaurant, which was later scrapped and led to the foundation of a marine zoological park. With \$1.5 million investment, the park was constructed on 21 acres in San Diego (CA) and opened for public on March 21, 1964. The first park had 45 employees, several dolphins, sea lions and two seawater aquariums. It was a huge success and drew over 400,000 visitors. Today, SeaWorld has 11 theme parks in the United States, including Orlando (FL), San Antonio (TX), the first park in San Diego (CA), Cypress Gardens, Winter Haven (FL), Boardwalk and Baseball, Haines City (FL), Busch Gardens, Williamsburg (VA), and Sesame Place, Langhorne, (PA). The park generated \$1.8 billion in revenue in 2014 with over 22.4 million people visiting

the park (SeaWorld, 2016). SeaWorld also has Discovery Cove, Orlando, which is an “exclusive tropical oasis where visitors can swim with the dolphins and other sea life.” Aquatica SeaWorld’s Waterpark in Orlando, San Antonio, and San Diego, “gives visitors a unique experience by combining water park thrills, nature, and animals.” In 1976, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. purchased SeaWorld and later all six amusement parks were bought by Anheuser-Busch. SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment is now a subsidiary of SeaWorld Entertainment, Inc. (SeaWorld, 2016).

On January 19, 2013, SeaWorld faced a backlash with the release of documentary ‘Blackfish’. The documentary accused SeaWorld of mistreating captive killer whales. The crisis escalated fast and damaged SeaWorld’s reputation, and the company had to face declining attendance, earnings, and stock prices (See Appendix A).

Corporate Character

The corporate character is a “unique identity, its differentiating purpose, mission, and values” of a company (Arthur W. Page Society, 2012-13). Today, the company’s character is defined by “*how* we are ‘is’ *who* we are”. It is important that the company looks and performs according to its stated character (Arthur W. Page Society, 2012-13).

SeaWorld “supports conservation programs and operates world’s most respected wildlife rescue programs.” The company’s goal through its conservation and rescue program is to “rehabilitate ill, injured, orphaned, and abandoned animals rescued by the park’s animal experts” and return these animals in the wild, whereas animals with “debilitating injuries are kept in the parks and given lifelong care” (SeaWorld, 2016). The company stands true to its corporate character despite the ‘Blackfish’ controversy as in 2015 SeaWorld rescued over 25,000 animals.

According to this SeaWorld rescue table, the animals released are manatees, sea turtles, “and animals they cannot use as performers in their shows” (Seashepherd, 2013). SeaWorld holds animals such as dolphins, whales, and sea lions, who can perform for them, captive. There are not enough genuine findings claiming that the SeaWorld releases all the animals they rescue and rehabilitate in the wild. Whether SeaWorld does what it states, is debatable.

SEAWORLD HAS RESCUED 25,000+ Animals!	Whales & Dolphins  474	Seals & Sea Lions  6,553	Turtles & Reptiles  1,868
	Otters  36	Birds  15,750	Manatees  512
			Other Mammals  57

Corporate Social Responsibility

SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment, Inc. is involved in various corporate social responsibility initiatives. The marine parks contribute in aquatic species “conservation, wildlife rescue, education, environmental stewardship programs around the world” (SeaWorld Annual Report, 2014, page 15). SeaWorld and Busch Gardens Conservation Fund, a non-profit organization, has been supporting “wildlife research, habitat protection, animal rescue and conservation education” (SeaWorld Annual Report, 2014, page 15).

SeaWorld works and supports various other environmental organizations such as the National Wildlife Federation, World Wildlife Fund, and The Nature Conservancy. “It contributes funds in support of efforts to ensure the sustainability of animal species in the wild” (SeaWorld

Annual Report, 2014, page 15). The marine park also collaborates with the federal and state governments to rescue ill and injured marine animals with a goal to rehabilitate and return them in the wild. In addition, SeaWorld partners with charities across the United States “whose values and mission are aligned with their own, including hospitals, organizations that serve children with disabilities and animal shelter and rescue groups” (SeaWorld Annual Report, 2014, page 15).

Blackfish Controversy

Overview of ‘Blackfish’ Crisis

The death of popular SeaWorld trainer, Dawn Brancheau, by 13,000-pound orca, Tilikum, in 2010 became the groundwork for the controversial documentary ‘Blackfish’ (Brower, 2013). The documentary, which was aired on CNN in 2013, portrayed “numerous practices related to orca captivity as unacceptable: SeaWorld’s domestic breeding programs; the separation of calves from their mothers; the sizes of the orca environments; and the safety of the trainers themselves” (Greenfeld, 2014, para 2). The documentary questions SeaWorld’s concept of keeping killer whales’ captive for entertainment and “suggests that Tilikum had been driven to madness because of captivity for many years” (Martinez, 2014).

The controversial documentary was first premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on January 19, 2013. It was later produced by Magnolia Pictures and acquired by CNN Films, and was aired for a wider audience. Nearly 21 million watched the documentary on CNN and within two years, ‘Blackfish’ became a threat to the brand ‘SeaWorld.’ After the film was aired on CNN in October, there was a huge outcry to boycott SeaWorld on social media. According to CNN, “Protesters not only lined the streets outside SeaWorld Orlando in Florida, the company’s flagship park, but also the streets of New York and Pasadena during the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade and the Rose Parade” (Savidge, 2013, para 4).

SeaWorld faced a backlash from dozens of celebrities who tweeted negatively about the park. Many artists, including Willie Nelson, Trace Adkins, Trisha Yearwood and Joan Jett declined to perform at the theme park’s concert series over the controversy. Social media was abuzz with many students and celebrities making videos and raising awareness of the documentary, ‘Blackfish’. This inspired PETA to campaign against SeaWorld and today it has become one of the biggest threats to SeaWorld (Zimmermann, 2014).

SeaWorld, in its defense, released a statement to CNN and called the documentary biased and one-sided. “Blackfish is billed as a documentary, but instead of a fair and balanced treatment of a complex subject, the film is inaccurate and misleading and, regrettably, exploits a tragedy that remains a source of deep pain for Dawn Brancheau’s family, friends, and colleagues” (CNN, 2013) [See Appendix B]. Many have questioned SeaWorld’s late respond to ‘Blackfish’ allegations. When the documentary debuted on CNN, the marine park came off as very defensive. They sent out emails to film critics against the “revelations in the documentary, pushed out op-eds lauding their rescue and conservation work, and full-page newspaper advertisements” calling the documentary misleading (Zimmerman, 2014, para 4).

In January 2014, former trainer Dawn Brancheau’s family distanced themselves from the documentary and said “Blackfish is not Dawn’s story. Dawn would not have remained a trainer at SeaWorld for 15 years if she felt that the whales were not well cared for. Trainer safety was important to Dawn, and it remains important to us as well,” said a statement on a charity website dedicated to the slain trainer (Savidge, 2014, para 13). Almost after a year of backlash, Southwest

Airlines and SeaWorld also ended their 26 years long-standing relationship.

'Blackfish' Effect on Animal Parks

Gabriela Cowperthwaite's 'Blackfish' has opened up debate on the captivity of animals not only in SeaWorld but also in other animal parks and zoos. The documentary had a great impact on public's view of animals in captivity in other water parks, conservation centers, and nonprofit zoos and aquariums (Lidz, 2015). Various zoos and animals' parks came out in their defense and called 'Blackfish' inaccurate. "The film is not fully accurate. Aquarium-goers feel conflicted and confused when they see sea mammals in captivity and with animal trainers. But many of the animals and fish in facilities are deemed 'non-releasable' by wildlife officials," said Tim Binder who oversees animal care and the rescue rehab program at Shedd Aquarium, an indoor public aquarium in Chicago, Illinois (Lidz, 2015, para 7).

Repositioning of SeaWorld

Two years after the release of controversial documentary 'Blackfish', SeaWorld started an aggressive long-term rebranding. The marine park began to roll out "multifaceted marketing campaign to shift public focus from the whales it holds in captivity" to its rescue and conservation programs (Titlow, 2015, para 1). Here are various campaigns launched by SeaWorld to repair its image.

Truth About Blackfish

A couple of months after SeaWorld's open letter, which appeared in major newspapers, including New York and USA Today, SeaWorld started an online truth campaign and built a dedicated web page called 'Truth About Blackfish' on its website to give people their version of the story. 'Truth About Blackfish' is a critical analysis of the 'Blackfish' documentary. The campaign was launched on all social media platforms of SeaWorld to provide facts with supporting examples why 'Blackfish' documentary was one-sided (See Appendix C).

SeaWorld Cares and Meet the Animals

By the end of 2014, SeaWorld CEO Jim Atchison was replaced by an experienced theme-park industry veteran, Joel Manby. The marine park, under the leadership of the new CEO, pushed marketing efforts for reputation management in full swing. In March 2015, SeaWorld launched 'SeaWorld Cares,' various television commercials and quarter-page print advertisements highlighting SeaWorld's rescue and rehabilitation program, and veterinary care.

"SeaWorld Cares' goal is to turn the parks inside out, so that guests can see all the good work we are doing with animals in terms of rescue, rehabilitation, treatment, to promote a greater appreciation of the whole mission," said SeaWorld's Senior Marketing Office Peter Frey (Greenfeld, 2014, para 5). SeaWorld also launched the 'Meet the Animals' campaign to address the common misperceptions about killer whales at SeaWorld (PRNewswire, 2015). "There is no better way to convey the depth of our commitment to these animals and the sophistication of our care than to hear the facts from our veterinarians, trainers, keepers, animal rescue experts, and curators," SeaWorld Entertainment, Senior Corporate Affairs, Jill Kermes (PRNewswire, 2015, para 3).

Ask SeaWorld

In March 2015, SeaWorld launched an online media campaign ‘Ask SeaWorld’. The tagline ‘You Ask. We Answer’ invited Twitter users to post questions to their veterinarians and trainers about its killer whales. Ask SeaWorld, a part of the SeaWorldCares website, which features videos, research, and articles on marine park’s rescue and rehabilitation program, is a platform to educate the public about SeaWorld and killer whales.

SeaWorld’s ‘Ask SeaWorld’ campaign backfired when animal rights activists hijacked the Twitter hashtag #AskSeaWorld in its initial stage. Many public relations experts called the campaign a social media fail (Titlow, 2015). Despite the backlash, SeaWorld through this campaign was able “to answer more than 1,000 questions and covered more than 150 new topics on its Ask SeaWorld page” (Daniels, 2015). “The campaign emphasizes SeaWorld’s 50-year commitment to continuous evolution while setting the record straight on false accusations by activists who oppose whales and other animals in zoological settings,” said Seaworld, Vice President of Communications Fred Jacobs (Pemberton, 2015, para 12).



Blue World Project

In 2015, SeaWorld also launched its ‘Blue World Project’. The project proposed to construct larger tanks than the existing ones. The marine park claimed to build new tanks thrice the size of the existing ones, with almost 1.5 acres of surface area and 50 feet of depth.

“Blue World is the fourth expansion of our killer whale environment at the park and is a demonstration of our ongoing commitment to their health and well-being,” said SeaWorld, San Diego, Zoological Operations, Vice President Mike Scarpuzzi (Hill, 2015, para 16).

The California Coastal Commission approved the proposed project on the condition that “SeaWorld will have to end forcible breeding of the killer whales and accept the new rules and regulations on the moving and selling of orcas.” The new regulations meant that if the killer whales die, the SeaWorld would not be able to move orcas from other parks into their own or buy new ones (Nightingale, 2015). In respond to the new regulations, SeaWorld claimed that the commission had no power to impose such a ban and filed a lawsuit against the Commission.



Ending Shamu Show

Recently, SeaWorld announced to end its iconic ‘Shamu Show’ in San Diego park as early as 2016 and replace it with a more conservation-based show by 2017. The show will end in San Diego park, but will continue at their other parks located in Orlando, Florida, and San Antonio, Texas. “We are listening to our guests, evolving as a company, we are always

changing...In 2017, we will launch an all new orca experience focused on the natural environment [of whales]. 2016 will be the last year of our theatrical killer whale experience in San Diego,” said SeaWorld CEO Joel Manby (Geer, 2015, para 4).

Timeline of unfolding of ‘Blackfish’ crisis

2010

- ✚ SeaWorld’s famous orca, Tilikum, kills trainer Dawn Brancheau in front of other SeaWorld employees. The media reports about the incident.

2011

- ✚ Investigative article written by Tim Zimmerman titled ‘Blood in the water’ appears in Outside Magazine highlighting other incidents that took place at SeaWorld.

2012

- ✚ The Occupational Safety and Health Administration bans trainers from entering the orcas tank and fines SeaWorld for \$75,000. The administration later reduces the fine to \$12,000.
- ✚ A book titled ‘Death at SeaWorld’ is published by journalist David Kirby, which gives an account of the Dawn Brancheau incident and talks about various incidents that took place at different locations of SeaWorld parks.

2013

- ✚ The ‘Blackfish’ documentary is released at Sundance Film Festival on January 19, 2013. The documentary is later picked up by Magnolia Pictures and CNN Films, and aired in October 2013. ‘Blackfish’ went viral and garnered nearly 21 million viewers.
- ✚ People boycott the marine park. There is widespread anger among the public which leads to online petitions, demonstrations and celebrity criticism. By the end of the year, there is five percent drop in SeaWorld’s attendance.

2014

- ✚ SeaWorld responds and creates an online campaign called ‘Truth About Blackfish’. The company through its campaign offers 69 reasons why people should not believe ‘Blackfish’.
- ✚ In July, Southwest Airlines and SeaWorld end their 26-year relationship. By the end of 2014, SeaWorld’s share drop by 51 percent and attendance by another five percent, and profits are down by 28 percent. SeaWorld CEO Jim Atchison resigns.
- ✚ Investors file a lawsuit against SeaWorld for misleading the company about the impact of ‘Blackfish’ on the marine park’s attendance rates.

2015

- ✚ In March, Joel Manby takes over SeaWorld as the new CEO. Twitter campaign ‘#AskSeaWorld’ is launched and backfires.
- ✚ In August, SeaWorld reports 84 percent drop in quarterly earnings, and further two percent drop in attendance. SeaWorld announces ‘Blue World Project’. The \$100 million project is focused on increasing the size of the tanks by 2018 in San Diego park. The marine park pledges to spend \$10 million on the conservation of orcas.
- ✚ Congressman Adam Schiff announces his plans to introduce the Orca Responsibility and Care Advancement Act to phase out captive orcas in the United States.
- ✚ The California Coastal Commission approves ‘Blue World Project’ on the condition that the park will have to stop orca breeding. In response, SeaWorld shelves the ‘Blue World Project’.
- ✚ SeaWorld plans to end its iconic ‘Shamu Show’ in 2016 and announces a new orca show, which will focus more on natural setting of the whales, in 2017.
- ✚ In December, SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment, Inc. sues the California Coastal Commission over the ban on breeding of killer whales.

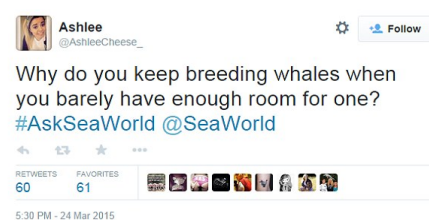
Public Response

Within a few months of the release of ‘Blackfish’, SeaWorld had to face a backlash from the general public, celebrities, and animal activists. The marine park had to deal with “declining attendance, negative headlines, celebrity criticism, and pervasive social media trolling” (Titlow, 2015, para 1). Seeking to repair the brand name ‘SeaWorld’, the marine park began an aggressive crisis communication campaign. While some of the campaigns got thumbs up, there were somewhere SeaWorld had to face public’s wrath.

General Public, Animal Activists and Celebrities on Social Media

Immediately following the screening of ‘Blackfish’ on CNN and Netflix, SeaWorld started “posting a variety of videos and press releases to inform the public what the film presented as ‘facts’ were false” (Osegi, 2014, para 8). When people started talking about ‘Blackfish’, two hashtags ‘#DontGoToSeaWorld’ and ‘#ThanksButNoTanks’ started trending on social media in response to SeaWorld’s ‘Truth About Blackfish’ campaign (Titlow, 2015).

The biggest campaign fail was SeaWorld’s Twitter campaign ‘#AskSeaWorld’. Many



including Miley Cyrus, Harry Styles, Ellen Page, Olivia Wilde and Aaron Paul, also came out against SeaWorld and urged their fans to never visit SeaWorld again. The ‘Blackfish’ controversy also led to celebrities canceling their shows at the marine park.

On initial response to the ‘#AskSeaWorld’ campaign, CEO Joel Manby said, “On the reputation side, early feedback on our campaign has been positive, however, we recognize that fully resolving our brand challenges in California will require sustained focus and commitment to correct misinformation” (New York Post, 2015, para 6).

Despite the negative tweets and a failed campaign, the announcement of ‘Blue World Project’ and ‘End of Shamu Show’ by SeaWorld got mixed reactions on Twitter. The ‘Blue World Project’ was “backed by 60 letters along with 135,000 notes of support for the project” (Stone, 2015). Backing the project, “SeaWorld’s ‘Blue World Project’ will undoubtedly be a welcome addition to the state and region, reaffirming California’s role as a leader in animal care and research,” said former San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders (Stone, 2015, para 28).



people started condemning SeaWorld on Twitter for its treatment of orcas at its theme parks. “The public has spoken, and they are against animal abuse,” said PETA, Assistant Director Elisa Allen (Pemberton, 2015, para 8).

According to Crimson Hexagon, before the ‘#AskSeaWorld’ campaign, there were already over 3.3 million tweets written about SeaWorld and ‘Blackfish’. The hashtag ‘#AskSeaWorld’ blew up with sarcastic remarks from PETA, the general public, and celebrities. “In just 5 days of the campaign, roughly 112k tweets, including the ‘#AskSeaworld’, the most retweeted posts included hashtags #blackfish and #emptythetanks” (Johnstonbaugh, 2015, para 5) [See Appendix D].

Later, when SeaWorld stopped replying negative tweets, twitter users created a new hashtag ‘#Answertheq’ to get their questions answered. In respond, SeaWorld tweeted, “We are trying to answer your questions but we have a few thousand trolls and bots to wade through #askseaworld #smh” (Pemberton, 2015, para 26).

Many celebrities,



PETA, which has been aggressively marketing against SeaWorld, did not approve of the ‘Blue World Project’. “If SeaWorld really wants to improve its image, it should spend its money on projects such as innovative animal-free exhibits that will truly wow people and coastal sanctuaries where marine mammals can feel and experience the ocean, hear their families and perhaps one day

is reunited with them. It shouldn't build a slightly bigger orca prison," PETA, President Ingrid Newkirk (Stone, 2015, para 29).

According to Visibrain, Twitter monitoring platform for digital marketing, there were 132,312 tweets for 'End of Shamu Show' announcement (Parsons, 2015, para 3). The announcement received mixed reactions on social media where the public stood with SeaWorld by showering support using the hashtag '#StandWithSeaWorld' but was outweighed by negative posts using the hashtags '#emptythetanks' and '#boycottseaworld,' which were mostly used by PETA and Blue Planet Society (Parsons, 2015).

Employees on 'Blackfish'

SeaWorld employees had mixed reactions where some current and former trainers called the documentary 'deceiving' and others, who appeared in the documentary 'Blackfish,' stated their stance against the captivity of orcas (Parker, 2014).

Mark Simmons, one of the first trainers of Tilikum and the trainer who was interviewed for the documentary, had said in an interview that 'Blackfish' director used only three-minute video clip featuring him whereas he was interviewed for three hours (Parker, 2014). "I was physically present for many of the events that [the trainers] talked about in the movie, and I can tell you firsthand they completely misrepresented, provided disinformation and in many cases blatantly lied about those events," said Simmons (Parker, 2014, para 5).



John Hangrove, one of the former trainers who appeared in 'Blackfish', also published a book titled 'Beneath the Surface: Killer Whales, SeaWorld, and the Truth Beyond 'Blackfish' which "chronicled the dangers of the captivity of killer whales and trainers alike" (NPR Books, 2015). Giving firsthand account, another former SeaWorld trainer, Bridgette Pirtle, supporting SeaWorld, said, "The film was produced to make money, gain an audience and push an agenda to release all killer whales and shut down SeaWorld" (Parker, 2014, para 6).

The documentary was not even approved by the family of former trainer Dawn Brancheau. "Neither we nor the foundation named after her is affiliated with the film. The film did not accurately reflect Brancheau or her experiences at SeaWorld," said Brancheau's family (Gracia, 2014) [See Appendix E].

Business Performance

Financial Impact

Despite the 'Blackfish' controversy and SeaWorld's dipping attendance, SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment, Inc., which made a debut as a public company on the New York Stock Exchange in early 2013, posted record earnings in final three months of 2013 (PRNewswire, 2014). According to PRNewswire, SeaWorld posted a "record revenue of \$1,460.3 million in 2013, an increase of \$36.5 million as compared from 2012. The marine parks total attendance dropped by 4.1 percent from 24.4 million in 2012 to 23.4 million visitors in 2013" (PRNewswire, 2014).

According to the SeaWorld Entertainment Financial Report 2014, the marine park “generated revenue of \$1,377.8 million, a decrease of \$82.4 million compared to 2013 as the attendance fell from 23.4 million visitors in 2013 to 22.4 million visitors in 2014. The decrease in revenue was primarily driven by a 4.2 percent decline in attendance, along with a 1.5 percent decline in total revenue per capita to \$61.51 in 2014 from \$62.43 in 2013” (See Appendix F).

SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment, Inc. has suffered 84 percent fall in profits since the release of ‘Blackfish’. According to The Wrap, SeaWorld Entertainment financial report posted that “the theme park suffered an 84 percent drop in its net second-quarter income; after a \$37.4 million haul in 2014, the park was only able to net \$5.8 million in 2015. Total revenues for the quarter fell from \$405.2 million in 2014 to \$391.6 million, marking a 3 percent drop year over year. The report also shows that Q2 attendance dropped by 100,000 visitors from 6.58 million in 2014 to 6.48 million” (Verhoeven, 2015, para 3).

In comparison to two years, the company, in the first nine months of 2015, saw an increase in attendance by 0.2 percent. The marine park attendance “primarily improved due to increased promotional offerings, strong pass holder visitation and additional customer event programs” (SeaWorld, 2016). According to SeaWorld Entertainment, Inc. Financial Report 2015, the marine park generated “revenue of \$1,103.1 million which was a decrease of \$10.01 million or 1 percent compared to 2014.”

Reputation Impact

Within the two years of the controversial documentary release, the marine park’s reputation had taken a serious hit with major organizations, including “PETA speaking up against the company’s captivity of orcas, former business partner Southwest severing ties with and entertainers such as Willie Nelson cancelling shows at the marine parks, and multiple celebrities speaking up against the company” (Merritt, 2015, para 1).

The marine park also had to face a lawsuit filed by investors for misleading them about the effect of the documentary on the revenue and attendance of the company. SeaWorld’s digital marketing suffered a setback with its social media hashtag ‘#AskSeaworld’ garnering critically negative tweets on Twitter. The marine park faced backlash on social media once again when One Direction lead singer Harry Styles shouted during a recent concert, ‘Don’t go to SeaWorld!’ (Merritt, 2015, para 13). According to Credit Suisse analysts, “Styles’ assertion was surprisingly damaging for the park, with a 400 percent spike in mentions of SeaWorld online in the past two months, with 68 percent of comments trending negatively” (Valinsky, 2015, Para 4). According to the data compiled by Brandwatch, the marine park “garnered 1.2 million mentions since July 1, out of which 62 percent of tweets were negative.” Just two days after Styles’ boycott call, mentions of “SeaWorld spiked 4.5 more times than normal” (Valinsky, 2015, Para 6).

According to analysts at Credit Suisse, SeaWorld’s brand has “hit rock bottom and is now stabilizing.” Analysts believe that if SeaWorld is able to generate positive buzz about the company and its treatment to killer whales held in captivity, the company will be able to bounce back (Merritt, 2015). With new changes to the park and positive predictions by analysts regarding attendance at the marine park, current SeaWorld CEO Joel Manby in an interview with Credit Suisse said, “I am confident [that] we are stabilizing. We can grow [an] attendance base and be a stronger company than before” (Bilbao, 2015, para 4).

Appendix A

Headlines from major newspapers

The Wall Street Journal

(February 6, 2015)

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

BUSINESS | EARNINGS

SeaWorld Attendance, Revenue Continue to Decline

Theme-park operator battling criticism over treatment of killer whales

International Business Times

(August 13, 2014)

‘Blackfish’ Effect: SeaWorld Stock Plunges After Controversial Film Sparks Ethical Debate

BY PHILIP ROSS  ON 08/13/14 AT 2:55 PM

Los Angeles Times

(April 3, 2014)



SeaWorld attendance drops 13% amid controversy over killer whales

Its visitor count fell to 3.05 million in the first three months of the year from 3.5 million a year earlier. The company denies it was caused by a backlash from the documentary film 'Blackfish.'

Appendix B

Statement released by SeaWorld to CNN in its defense

A MESSAGE FROM SEAWORLD ON THE FILM BLACKFISH

Category: Park News | 23/12/2013

[< BACK](#)



Blackfish is billed as a documentary, but instead of a fair and balanced treatment of a complex subject, the film is inaccurate and misleading and, regrettably, exploits a tragedy that remains a source of deep pain for Dawn Brancheau's family, friends and colleagues. To promote its bias that killer whales should not be maintained in a zoological setting, the film paints a distorted picture that withholds from viewers key facts about SeaWorld – among them, that SeaWorld is one of the world's most respected zoological institutions, that SeaWorld rescues, rehabilitates and returns to the wild hundreds of wild animals every year, and that SeaWorld commits millions of dollars annually to conservation and scientific research. Perhaps most important, the film fails to mention SeaWorld's commitment to the safety of its team members and guests and to the care and welfare of its animals, as demonstrated by the company's continual refinement and improvement to its killer whale facilities, equipment and procedures both before and after the death of Dawn Brancheau.

Inaccurate reports recently have generated questions about SeaWorld and the animals in our care. The truth is in our parks and people, and it's time to set the record straight.

Here are some important facts about SeaWorld and our work:

SeaWorld does not capture killer whales in the wild. Due to the groundbreaking success of our research in marine mammal reproduction, we haven't collected a killer whale from the wild in 35 years. In fact, only two of the whales in our care were collected by SeaWorld and they continue to be in our care today. In addition, our research has led to a much greater understanding of whales in the wild, giving researchers important scientific insights surrounding marine mammal reproduction.

We do not separate killer whale moms and calves. SeaWorld recognizes the important bond between mother and calf. On the rare occasion that a mother killer whale cannot care for the calf herself, we have successfully hand raised and reintroduced the calf. Whales are only moved to maintain a healthy social structure.

SeaWorld invests millions of dollars in the care of our killer whales. In the last three years alone, we have invested \$70 million in our killer whale habitats and millions of dollars annually in support of these facilities. Our habitats are among the largest in the world today. They are state-of-the-art, multimillion-gallon environments of cooled and filtered water that allow for the highest and safest standards of care. We give our animals restaurant-quality fish, exercise, veterinary care, mental stimulation, and the company of other members of their species.

SeaWorld's killer whales' life spans are equivalent with those in the wild. While studies continue to define the average life span of killer whales in the wild, the most recent science suggests that our killer whales' life spans are comparable — indeed, five of our animals are older than 30, and one of our whales is close to 50.

The killer whales in our care benefit those in the wild. We work with universities, governmental agencies and NGOs to increase the body of knowledge about and the understanding of killer whales — from their anatomy and reproductive biology to their auditory abilities. Some populations of wild killer whales have been classified as endangered or threatened, demonstrating the potential critical nature of these research opportunities. This type of controlled research and study is simply not possible in the wild, and has significant real-world benefits to the killer whales that live there.

SeaWorld is a world leader in animal rescue. The millions of people who visit our parks each year make possible SeaWorld's world-renowned work in rescue, rehabilitation and release. We are constantly innovating when it comes to this care: Our veterinarians have created nursing bottles to hand-feed orphaned whales, prosthetics to save sea turtles, and a wetsuit to help injured manatees stay afloat during rehabilitation. Whether it's the result of natural or man-made disasters, SeaWorld is always on call and often the first to be contacted. We have rescued more than 23,000 animals with the goal of treating and returning them to the wild.

(<http://www.seaworldparks.co.uk/media-centre/latest-news/a-message-from-seaworld/>)

Appendix C

SeaWorld launched ‘Truth About Blackfish’ webpage to tell their version of the story





OUR WORK ▾THE FACTS ▾NEWSBLOGTAKE ACTIONASK SEAWORLD

SEARCHGO

TRUTH ABOUT BLACKFISH





24 SEA TURTLES RECEIVE LIFE-SAVING FLIGHT TO SEAWORLD

The critically debilitated, cold-stunned Kemp's ridley sea turtles are part of the overwhelming amount of stranded and endangered sea turtles impacted by the region's oncoming winter weather.

[LEARN MORE >](#)

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.



FOR SEAWORLD, CONSERVATION IS IN THE BAG

With the new “Creating a Cleaner World” program, SeaWorld San Diego will now have reusable shopping bags available for guests to purchase for as low as 99 cents per bag!

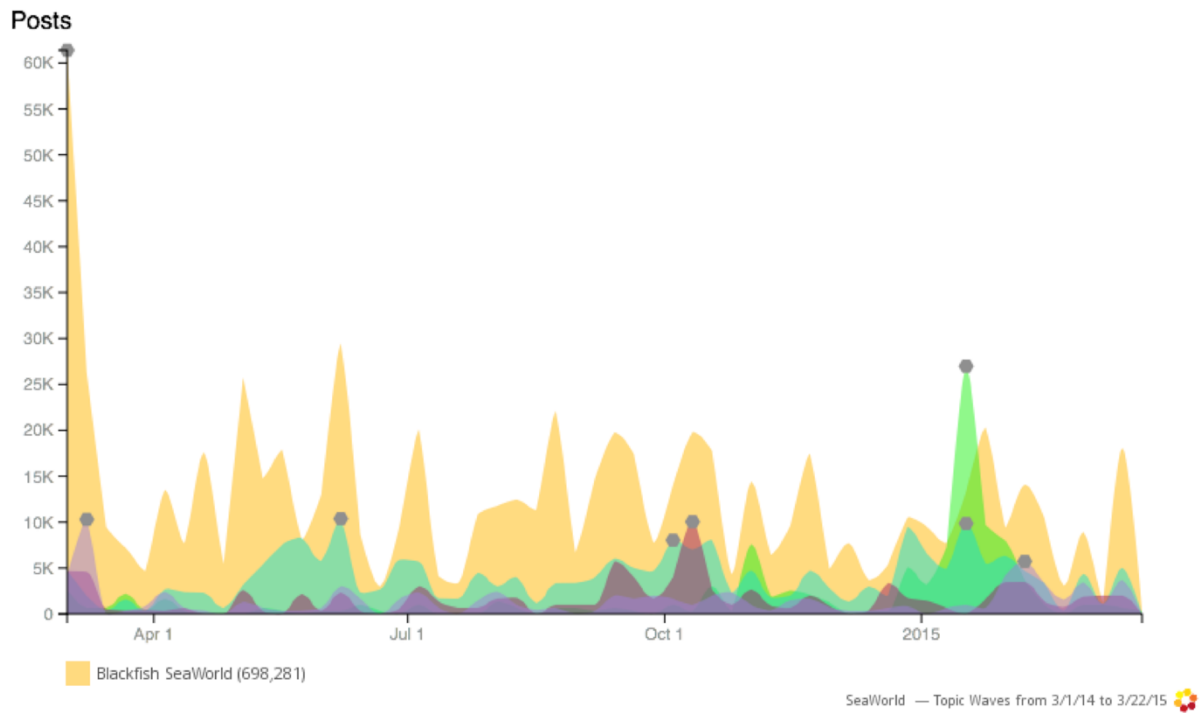
[LEARN MORE >](#)



RESEARCH HELPS WILD WHALES

(<http://seaworldcares.com/the-facts/truth-about-blackfish/>)

Appendix D



This chart shows us that ‘Blackfish SeaWorld’ related tweets outweighed ‘SupportSeaWorld’ tweets on Twitter.

[\(http://www.crimsonhexagon.com/blog/marketing/askseaworld-hashtag-discussion-does-more-harm-than-good/\)](http://www.crimsonhexagon.com/blog/marketing/askseaworld-hashtag-discussion-does-more-harm-than-good/)

Appendix E

Dawn Brancheau's Family Statement About Blackfish

There has recently been an abundance of attention focused on the film "Blackfish." As the family of Dawn Brancheau, we are continually asked how we feel about the movie. We would like to take this opportunity to write briefly about the film so we can move on and continue our efforts to make the world a better place in honor of Dawn.

First and foremost, we are not affiliated with this movie in any way. We did not assist with its creation and were unaware of its content until the film was shown at the Sundance Film Festival. The Dawn Brancheau Foundation as well as our family members have never and will never accept any compensation from its production.

The film has brought a great deal of attention to the welfare of animals, and for that we are grateful. However, "Blackfish" is not Dawn's story. Dawn Brancheau believed in the ethical treatment of animals. Dawn followed her dreams and became a marine animal trainer. She loved the whales and was proud of her work as a trainer. Dawn thrived on introducing the whales to the audience and educating them about the animals in her care. Dawn would not have remained a trainer at SeaWorld for 15 years if she felt that the whales were not well cared for. Trainer safety was important to Dawn, and it remains important to us as well. Our family always supported Dawn and we continue to support Dawn's friends and co-workers who currently care for the animals she so loved.

Since Dawn's death nearly four years ago, the media has focused mainly on the whales. A human life was lost that day and it feels as though some believe her death was just a footnote. Dawn's death is central to our story. In 2010, we created the Dawn Brancheau Foundation in her honor to continue the legacy of the work important to Dawn during her life. The Foundation focuses on improving the lives of children and animals in need, inspiring others to follow their dreams, and promoting the importance of community service. The Foundation will continue its efforts to make a difference in our world. We are grateful for all the caring individuals who help us keep Dawn's light shining brightly.

(http://articles.orlandosentinel.com/2014-01-21/business/os-dawn-brancheau-blackfish-statement-20140121_1_killer-whales-blackfish-orca-tilikum)

Appendix F

Stock price of SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment has been declining since the release of the documentary 'Blackfish'.



(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/27/jane-goodall-seaworld_n_7153818.html)

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