

ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO GO THERE?: BUSINESSES AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF  
POLITICAL ADVOCACY

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## Introduction

Reputation and public opinion are vital focuses of an organization. If success is to be had, consumers need to feel positive about the organization and the different actions that they are taking. Mahon (2002) explains that reputation is one of the greatest assets that an organization can have, because it builds trust and creates stronger relationships with all stakeholders. Without these relationships, consumers and stakeholders will look elsewhere to conduct their business. In today's world, consumers are concerned about much more than whether or not an organization manufactures a product that is of strong quality or provides a valuable service. The focus on the organizational persona or image, in more ways than just their goods and services, continues to grow in intensity for organizations as the variety of options for consumers is constantly growing and expanding. In many industries, there is enough variance in organizations that consumers are quickly able to change where they purchase products or services.

This fact, combined with the growing amount of transparency that is expected from organizations, thanks to social media, leads consumers to want and anticipate more from the organizations that they regularly interact with and buy from. Consumers want to know what organizations care about, understanding how these organizations think or make decisions. The idea of organizations having these human-like qualities has led some organizations over the past couple years to speak or act out in support of politically charged issues such as marriage equality, healthcare, and many others. Bodie (2012) suggests that many organizations have begun to look at when they can support politics in a way that will benefit their organization, while other organizations do so as a way of supporting pre-existing beliefs. While this can gain support, it also has the possibility of

causing organizations to lose customers. Specifically, when we look at the organizations that have done this in the past couple years, there have been protests against them from the opposing sides. We can look to fast food franchise Chick-Fil-A for a clear example. Grover, Jacob, and Chakraborty (2013) explain that after the CEO of the organization, Dan Cathy, spoke out against marriage equality, the organization faced harsh backlash on Twitter and protestors outside of many of their organization locations. At the same, the organization also gained a lot of support from their actions, with support campaigns created at all of their different locations.

Organizations taking on human-like qualities and expressing their opinions about politically and socially charged issues is not something that only gains news media coverage when they are large companies. On the contrary, there have been very small, family-owned organizations that have sparked controversy from their actions and opinions as well. Ohlheiser (2015) tells the stories of Sweet Cakes by Melissa, a local bakery in Oregon and Arlene's Flowers in Washington. Both of these organizations faced scrutiny after they refused to provide services for same-sex marriages. The organizations, and others like this, then gained even more coverage than from their initial actions when GoFundMe pages were started on their behalf for consumers to support them in their stances. However, this then prompted GoFundMe to change the guidelines for who can raise money on their site, not wanting to promote any sort of discrimination. All organizations could face this news media following if they become involved in a situation like this, making studying the coverage and the impact that it has even more important.

After organizations speak out about or act in support of a political position there is often a significant amount of news media and public coverage given to the organization.

But, just like there are multiple sides to every issue, the coverage is not always positive or negative. Many times, news media companies and news outlets frame these situations in the way that they believe the more powerful group of the public sees them and want others to see them (Entman, 2004). This causes the situation to gain even more exposure and the reaction from the public to be even more extreme. This is something that organizations must keep in mind as they consider these actions. It is not always clear what impact news media framing will have on the future reputation of the organization after speaking out about a social charged issue.

### **Degree of Importance/Rationale**

The idea of news framing impacting reputation is essential for examining what is best for organizations, when considering making a decision, in regards to speaking out about a politically or socially charged issue. Einwiller, Carroll, and Korn (2010) explain that news media framing has the power to influence company reputations in many different ways. The way that news interpret stories and situations, influences and changes the way, at least to some degree, that the public not only interpret, but also respond to stories and situations. When looking at this from a public relations perspective, it is imperative to always consider how actions could alter reputation. All actions taken by a business must be thought about beforehand, in order to avoid conflict or misjudgment. Organizational employees cannot act on a whim, saying something that has not been very thoroughly thought through, because it could have the possibility of greatly affecting the way their organization is perceived and accepted or rejected.

The news media frame issues in the ways that the journalists, editors, and publishers believe they need to be addressed and talked about. News media help us to begin dialogues and continue to grow our society. In doing this, in regards to business, they help to build up, tear down, or further confirm existing reputations, possibly strongly altering public perceptions of reality. Because of this, it is vital to consider how the news media will likely frame the statements or actions that are taken by organizations in these regards. Knowing in advance how the news media could frame issues is necessary, because it will dictate the conversation in many ways and ultimately influence behavior. Through examining how framing influences the concepts addressed in theory of planned behavior, organizations will be able to predict how their consumers and stakeholders will likely react. Organizations need to think about the factors that influence their consumers, putting their actions into context, to know what the outcome will likely be. If organizations are able to have a better idea of the impact such a statement could have, they can feel more confident in knowing whether it is best to speak or to remain silent.

This project explores this idea, coming to a conclusion so that organizations will know what to do when they are deciding how to speak as an organization. Specifically, a content analysis has been conducted to explore the organizations of Chick-Fil-A and Hobby Lobby and the news media coverage that they received after getting involved in politically and socially charged issues. Through understanding and interpreting the results of this analysis, conclusions will be able to be drawn about the overall levels of positivity and negativity in the coverage and the sources that are used. Additionally the analysis will examine if the coverage is persuasive in any way and if media sources are similar in their coverage. Through understanding these results, insight will be drawn about how future

organizations can learn from the situations of Chick-Fil-A and Hobby Lobby and how acting in a similar way to these organizations could impact the reputation of another organization.

### **Literature Review**

If further research about this topic is to be successful, it is important to first examine scholarly literature in these areas and how the already established beliefs and ideas influence the concepts that will be studied. Looking at reputation, and the importance level that it has to organizations, will give the foundation for why knowing the impacts of news framing is necessary for organizations. Next, through understanding theory of planned behavior, it will be clearer how organizations can use the findings from this research, in combination with the theory to know what to expect in the situation of speaking out. Finally, through looking at news media framing and understanding how this aspect of news has had an impact on consumers and society in the past, conclusions will be drawn about the role news media framing is able to play in all situations faced by organizations, guiding conclusions regarding its impact related to these organizational decisions.

### **Reputation**

When organizations are considering sharing political stances with consumers, other factors that could influence their reputations must be kept in mind. One of these is the close association between the CEO's individual behaviors or attitudes not done in connection with the organization and that of the organizations. Specifically, the things that the CEO says and the way that he or she conducts themselves, will be directly connected (in the audiences' eyes) to the actions or thoughts of the organization as a whole (Covington, 2013). This idea can even be furthered with the idea that the CEO's personal reputation

being improved, without thinking about the company's reputation, can inadvertently have a positive impact on the reputation of the organization, and vice versa (Sohn & Lariscy, 2012).

Additionally, the pre-existing reputation that an organization has going into any crisis or situation impacts the way that consumers interact with them. Many consumers pay attention to actions and behaviors of organizations that impact the public, such as the corporate social responsibility of an organization (Dean, 2004). Knowing this information about an organization can change the way that they respond when other situations or crises happen. In recent years, this is further connected to the habits and ethics of businesses. Consumers have an understanding of the way that organizations conduct themselves, feeling strongly about this, and allowing this to influence their interactions with the organization, whether the interactions be positive or negative (Creyer, 2014). Understanding this information and having feelings about it before any other situation happens with an organization will change and influence the way that consumers respond to the other situations.

Reputation has an even heightened sense of importance in the practice and success of organizational public relations. When making decisions in the public relations department of an organization, practitioners are constantly thinking of reputation management and the different steps that need to be taken in order to secure a positive public perception (Hutton, Goodman, Alexander & Genest, 2001). Just as the historical reputation of an organization influences future and current public perceptions, changing public perceptions for any reason has the ability to strongly impact an organization's reputation. Practitioners need to be watching and attempting to control the many different

factors that influence public perception so that a positive reputation can be kept, if organizations want to have a loyal and growing customer base (Klousis, Popescu & Mitrook, 2007).

### **Theory of Planned Behavior**

Once a consumer has learned about the reputation of an organization, consumers think about this reputation in comparison to their person actions, beliefs, and ideas about what a strong organization should be to determine what their buying behavior will be. Consumers look to the reputations and the images that organizations put forward to determine how they can connect to the organization and if this organization is one that they identify with (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994). To understand the reasons that consumers act the way that they do, there are three main factors to consider, “attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms with respect to the behavior, and perceived control over the behavior” (Ajzen, 1991, p. 206). When trying to predict behavior, companies can consider these factors in regards to the publics that they typically target in order to feel confident in assuming the way that they would think (DeCanniere, Pelsmacker & Geuenus, 2008). When making purchasing decisions, consumers look at both the way that they personally feel about the product that they are going to buy and connecting with a company, as well as how their peers will react or look at them (McGuire, 1976).

Additionally, when thinking about these three behaviors, if organizations are able to combine these three factors with the previous behaviors of their publics, their level of assurance in knowing and understand their customers can grow even more (DeCanniere et al., 2008). Organizations need to understand the perceptions and concerns that consumers have about certain purchasing behaviors, so that they can address these behaviors.

Through understanding why consumers acted in a certain way in the past, in combination with their ideas about the characteristics addressed above, they will be able to help them feel more comfortable interacting with organizations (George, 2004). Having information and knowledge about the way that specific publics feel about a certain topic, situation or issue, can help organizations understand the framing that will influence specific behaviors, through the predictive powers of theory of planned behavior (Juraskova, Laidsaar-Powell, Mullan & Mccaffery, 2011).

**Values and beliefs.** Values and beliefs are each defined in different ways and have many different facets. Vinson, Scott, and Lemont (1977) touch on this vastness in regards to values through combining many different definitions to describe the aspects of values that are most important. Values are beliefs that individuals hold close to their hearts and use to guide actions, behaviors and reactions. Österholm (2010) explains that beliefs are ideas, concepts, or knowledge that people understand to be true, even if they are not always proven as facts. These beliefs are different for all people and come with the knowledge that these ideas are not concepts that everyone agrees upon or believes to be true.

The way that organizational factors connect with consumers' values and beliefs is vital to the way that consumers interact with organizations. These values and beliefs are what influence their attitudes toward purchasing behavior, specifically in connection to the three theory of planned behavior factors that are considered when predicting behavior. Consumers usually attempt to align the things that they think are important with their buying habits. If consumers are concerned about the environment, they may (where they can) choose foods that packaging is made from recyclable materials (Hauser, Nussbeck &

Jonas, 2013). There are times though when consumers are not informed enough to really make these decisions. However, when organizations have a very prominent crisis or a heavily news media covered action or statement happen, the responses from consumers make the connections to values becomes much more extreme. Consumers making purchasing choices stemming from values and beliefs is something that becomes much more heightened if an organization is known for doing something very damaging, such as Exxon (Carrigan & Attalla, 2001). With the case of Exxon, this was a company that the general public trusted, but they allowed for a large amount of oil to be spilled and when this was not quickly cleaned up, it continued to have negative impacts to the people in these areas in many different ways.

Consumers pay close attention to the way that organizations connect with them and their individual feelings. Specifically, consumers watch the ways that organizations contribute to the most prominent issues impacting our society (most importantly, the issues that they personally feel most passionate about) and the way that organizations try to help make these situations better (Bhattacharyya & Bhadra, 2011). This is particularly prominent with feelings or opinions that have a religious connection for consumers. When organizations make a very specialized connection to one religious group, this will grow the interactions that they have with people are a part of this group. However, at the same time, this will also likely cause them to alienate and lose a larger group of consumers who are not a part of this specific religious group (Delener, 1990). While it can be advantageous for organizations to align themselves with certain individual groups of consumer feelings, they must move with caution as the possibility exists that they will alienate more people than they are connecting with.

## **Media Framing**

After there are events that happen in society that are out of the realm of normal, the news media decide how to frame this issue and present it to the public. This includes all things that are covered by the news media. For example, when an organization becomes involved with a politically or socially charged issue, when a politician or other famous person acts in a way that is surprising or when there is a large governmental decision or action taken. When considering stories that they are working on, other people's opinions or behaviors influence journalists, in some way, leading them to make a judgment about exactly what should be covered and the way that the story should be framed. This has a significant amount of power, as it can encourage or discourage consumers from acting and behaving in certain ways (Entman & Rojecki, 1993). When deciding on how to frame a situation or story, journalists consider the environment of the issue and the different factors influencing the situation, as well as the external environment and the general place society is at in relation to an issue or topic, as far as the opinions that are most popular and the way that issues have evolved over time (De Vreese, 2005). For example, society changes in the opinions that are accepted as right as people evolve in their beliefs. Examples of these include the different ways that our society has been able to change the rights and the equalities of certain groups of people, such as for women and homosexuals.

Specifically, when framing politically charged issues, journalists and other news media gatekeepers typically focus on attribution and value relations. Knowing that many opinions and actions related to these issues are value connected, news media sources assume they should make this connection for the audience (Zhang & Min, 2012). Not only this, but because news have to convey the different stories and topics in a way that their

audience will understand, the language that is used and the connections that are made possible from this language can impact the way that an audience accepts or rejects a story or topic. Essential, in the way that stories and topics are framed, the news media hold the power in ensuring that the audience is able to comprehend a story and make the possible connections to their own life (Reese, Gandy, Grandy & Grant, 2001).

To further this idea, while news media do not completely determine and heavily influence all consumers' opinions, they do set the discourse and begin the conversation for what topics be discussed publically and in what ways. In many instances, the ways that things are discussed and the way that this begins can end up echoing the public opinion at large (Gamson & Modigliano, 1989). Knowing that the general public does not have a significant amount of knowledge about certain topics (especially political topics), journalists and other key players in the news media touch on values that they know will connect with people quickly. When this happens, some people do not even seek out additional information to make a more informed decision about a topic. Instead they almost immediately make a decision based on the value that was touched on in the news media's framing of the issue (Brewer & Gross, 2005). Ultimately, news frames set by news media have the power to change and set the overall societal view of a topic, as well as individual views (De Vreese, 2005).

**Media influence.** The news media have a power over individuals and their buying habits in a large way. Through the way that stories are framed in the news media, the conversation that happens in society is influenced and personal opinions and beliefs concerning organizations can be changed (Coleman, 1993). The way that consumers see organizations in the news media, whether it be the way the news media portray

organizational brands or the things that are being said about organizations, influences the way the way that consumers see organizations and the beliefs and stories that consumers associate organizations with. Many organizations underscore the aspects that consumers consider when deciding between different brands and types of products. Consumers are more concerned with what organizations think, feel and believe and the way that they are positively impacting the world, instead of their advertisements and flashy tactics (Bhattacharyya & Bhadra, 2011).

To add to this, when organizations are responding to a crisis or a situation in general, the person that they put in the news media and the perception of that person will also influence the publics' opinions. If the CEO of an organization is held in high esteem and is seen as likable from the news media's portrayal of him or her, being put forward in that way, this will help the perception of the organization no matter what they are really saying (Sohn & Lariscy, 2012).

Sometimes, certain people do not have the personal knowledge to know how to feel about something the moment it happens. Because of this, the way that the news media frames a subject, will influence the way that people initially learn about the topic, hear about the topic, and further talk about the topic (Gamson & Modigliano, 1989). Through organizations connecting issues to values, before the audience even have the ability to do, they are (in some ways) deciding for the audience how they should feel, based on how others with the same values feel in relation to an issue (Zhang & Min, 2012).

However, this influence is not something that is automatic or means that consumers simply believe whatever the news media say, allowing that to be their opinion. Early communication research discusses the hypodermic needle idea in news media, meaning

that the public, essentially, blindly believes what the news media tell them, adapting that opinion (Bineham, 1988). It is clear that this is not the case and that instead there is an impact that news media can have and an influence that exists because of the conversations that come from what stories the news media puts forward and the beliefs that news media suggest (Bineham, 1988). But, this is not something that all consumers believe or that happens automatically.

### **News Conformity**

While news publications all want to be unique in the stories that they are putting forward, there are many times when news media publications are influenced by what other journalists and publications are putting forward. The first story that is covered by a news media can impact stories that are put forward by other publications, even though the journalists writing the stories do not believe that this is true (Foote & Steele, 1986). Additionally, because certain news media publications choose to frame politically charged stories in a way that favors a certain segment of the population, many stories conform to the same concepts and ideas, telling the same story just from different journalists or slightly different points of view (Graber, 2003).

News conformity can also become a problem because of the competition between publications that exist. News media publications face a balancing act because they do not want to be too different from other publications as to not alienate readers, yet they want to make sure that they are not just putting forward the same exact stories. This balance can negatively impact stories that the public has access to because it leads to conformity and similarities in stories (Pan & Kosicki, 2010).

## Hypotheses

It is important to remember that almost all news media organizations are for-profit businesses. They are looking to make sure that they gain as many consumers as they can to sell advertising. Because of this, it seems fair to hypothesize that when the news media frame issues of organizations becoming involved in politically and socially charged, they are going to frame them in a way that seems to emphasize conflict. These news media organizations are not going to side with the organization or show the positives. Instead, I believe that they will be much more likely to explain why what the organization did in speaking out was negative and find a way to show hurt to certain members of the public. Grabe, Zhou, Lang, and Bolls (2010) suggest that through putting forward the more negative or arousing side of a story in the news media, audiences are more likely to read the story and pay attention to the coverage that the publications are putting forward. Specifically, this will be even truer if the organization took a more conservative approach, or the less popular side of any issue.

H1a: When framing these situations, news media will present more negative sources than positive sources.

H1b: When framing these situations, the words of the authors will be more negative than positive.

H1c: When framing these situations, the words that the authors use will be more persuasive in nature than informative.

As discussed above, news media organizations are mainly for-profit businesses. Because of this, news media are going to do what it takes to make sure that they are putting forward stories that are intriguing and have drama. Through siding with the more negative

side of the situation and opposing the organization, there is going to be more excitement and interest behind the story and the stories that are written could get more attention.

H2: When framing these situations, news media will side with the liberal, or more socially progressive, side of the argument, especially if it is seen as more popular.

Graham, Haidt, and Nosek (2009) explain that based on individuals' moral beliefs and their overall ideological identities they are able to determine if they are more liberal or conservative in the way that they want the world and society to run. Conover and Feldman (1981) explain that the liberal or socially progressive minded individuals are more in support of ideas that give people more freedom and more choices about how they want to live their life. These liberally or socially progressive issues are usually issues like abortion, gay rights, women's rights, and other things like this, allowing all people to choose how they want to live and be given equal freedoms. This is seen as more progressive or forward moving in nature because it is different than society has lived in the past (Conover and Feldman, 1981).

Similar to the ideas discussed above, through giving more attention to the more liberal or socially progressive news media, organizations are speaking about ideas that illicit louder and more aggressive responses. Through talking about equality and freedom, in relation to these different social issues, news media bring more attention and drama to the stories. Even more than this, through supporting the more conservative side or the aspects of issues that are seen as discriminating against groups of people and giving more attention to this side the news media organizations run the risk of giving off the impression that they discriminate as well or have these same ideas, which is something that the news media organizations do not want to be associated with.

Additionally, it is expected that news media will be similar in their portrayal of these organizations and the framing that they do of these situations. Once some news media organizations speak out about one of these situations, it seems unlikely to me that news media will want to take a different side or disagree with these other news media. Aviles and Carvajal (2008) suggests that there is a growing level of media convergence where the news media all present very similar sides of a story that is presented to the public. This is even more heightened in recent years because of social media and the promptness that has become expected with getting a story out into the public. Schudson (1989) shares another way that these similarities happen, as journalists are impacted by the stories of other journalists that they read, changing the way that they write their own personal stories.

H3: News media will be similar in their portrayal of the organizations, all taking the side that has already been taken by other news media.

### **Research Questions**

After examining the literature that exists on this subject thus far, it is clear that a gap exists. Organizations are becoming more interested in the possibility of speaking out about socially charged issues. As there has been an increased emphasis on corporate social responsibility, it has prompted organizations to think and align more with the beliefs that they have and let these beliefs be known to the public (Campbell, 2007). While it is known that the news media will likely cover these issues, or either the local or national level, more research needs to be done on how the news media frame these situations. Once an understanding has been reached regarding the way that the news media frame these issues, conclusions can be drawn about potential effects on organizations' reputations. This

will help organizations when they are making these decisions because through using theory of planned behavior, they can anticipate how their consumers and stakeholders could respond to the types of news media frames and the reputation change that happens because of the news media coverage.

RQ 1: How do the news media frame organizations speaking out about politically and socially charged issues?

RQ 2: Do the news media frame the issues similarly to that of other news organizations, or does it differ depending on the source?

Answers to these research questions, will help understand what organizations can expect from the news media when they are in these situations. This will help to guide the decisions that these organizations can make and will act as a foundation of knowledge in this area.

### **Methodology**

While speaking out about politically or socially charged issues is not something that all organizations do, it is something that has been consistently growing over the last years. Because this is something that not all organizations are doing, it is somewhat unmarked territory, making it hard for organizations to know what will happen to them if they move forward with this kind of behavior. The best way for future organizations to know what the likely repercussions or implications of their actions will be is to look back on what has happened to other organizations. Specifically, it is most important to explore how the news media framed the speaking out that the organizations did. In the literature that was explored it became clear that the news media play a large role in the opinions that are

formed by the public and the overall size of a crisis situation that an organization can face. In order to examine this, a content analysis was conducted of newspaper coverage of organizations that have spoken or acted out about a politically charged issue in some way. The ways that these organizations have gotten themselves involved with these issues differ. However, examining multiple different ways of speaking out on politically and socially charged issues will help public relations practitioners to understand the situation and its implications for organizational public relations decisions more fully.

There are two prominent organizations, and situations associated with them, that were examined and evaluated to draw meaning from. Each of these cases were approached and handled in a different way by the news, but all show these organizations speaking or acting out in support of a politically charged issue. These issues were chosen for the large reaction that they gained from the news media and the prominence that they play in our culture and society. The first is the Chick-Fil-A case of 2014, when CEO Dan Cathy spoke out about gay marriage and marriage equality. Chick-Fil-A has long been known as an organization that was created and is owned by a family of devout Christians. In the way that Chick-Fil-A run their business, treat their customers, and with the closing of their organization on Sunday, they have never hidden their beliefs from the public. In knowing the ideas that some Christians believe come from the Bible, when it comes to marriage equality and homosexual people, many could assume and guess that the way that Cathy spoke is the way that the organization feels. However, the organization had never explicitly commented on the issue until Cathy's comments in 2014 (Grover, Jacob and Chakroborty 2013).

Sieczkowski (2014) explained in her Huffington Post article that Cathy spoke out in an interview about how he and his organization view marriage, specifically explaining that they support what he concedes to be the biblical definition of marriage. He went on to explain that this caused an extreme response from both those in support of Cathy and Chick-Fil-A, as well as those in opposition, with support days and protests following. It was later found that the organization had been donating money to organizations that actively protest marriage equality and had been doing so for years. Yet, it was not until the opinion was explicitly stated in the interview that Dan Cathy did, released, that the general public had opinions about it.

The Hobby Lobby case of 2014 is the second case that was analyzed. Lupu (2015) explains that this case occurred when the organization did not want to be required to provide medical coverage for things connected to women's preventative care, like birth control. The organization is owned by a family who is open about their Christian beliefs and values. Prompted by their beliefs, the owners went so far as to take this fight to the Supreme Court, in response to requirements put on businesses from the Affordable Care Act. Specifically, the organization did so to prevent having to pay for birth control products that, they believe, cause abortions (Beck, 2014). The Affordable Care Act regulates healthcare, requiring that the health insurance plans offered by employers pay for contraceptive medicine. However, because the organization's owners place a high emphasis on their personal Christian values, they felt that this requirement forced them to go against their beliefs, as an organization, infringing on their freedom of religion.

Hobby Lobby won the case and was no longer required to pay for the specific birth control bills that were outlined in the case. The federal government responded to this

decision by giving people who are employed by Hobby Lobby the opportunity to still have their medication paid for, just as they normally would have. Similarly to the Chick-Fil-A case, the general public responded largely to this case, either supporting or opposing the organization and what they have done. Not only did it prompt a larger response, but it prompted many copy cat cases, where other organizations put up a fight, explaining that they also did not want to be required to pay for these medications. For example, Hughes (2014) explains that after Hobby Lobby won their case, Eternal World Television Network, as well as other organizations, came forward hoping that they too would not have to provide these contraceptive services because of other personal Christian beliefs. This has and will continue to create tension, as it is hard to prove which cases should be allowed the same privileges as Hobby Lobby and which should not.

In order to understand how individuals or a public came to the positions that they took, regarding their opinions about these cases, we must first look at the way that the news media framed these cases. Specifically, this project will explore if the news media portrayed the speaking out as something that was positive and for the good of society or something that was negative, discriminatory against a group of people in some way. Additionally, this content analysis examined if the articles encouraged readers to a call to action at the end of the articles or if any sort of guidance was given as to what the readers should do next. It will be necessary to examine if the articles used language that was persuasive in nature, encouraging readers to believe a certain side or opinion, or if the language was simply informative in nature. Finally, it will be important to explore if any consumer reaction was shown in the coverage that was given and was this coverage given

to each sides fairly. For example, were there protests of the organizations that were written about by these organizations.

### **Future Use**

Once we know the way that publications frame these politically and socially charged issues and the potential implications that come from the news media coverage, organizations will be able to use it to anticipate the way that their reputation will be altered, based on the consumers that they have. From here, organizations can use the principles in the theory of planned behavior to know how their consumers will react to them and how a decision to speak out about an issue would change their buying behaviors when it comes to the organization and the relationship that exists. In knowing this, organizations will be able to make more informed and intelligent decisions for their business when it comes to whether they should speak out or not.

### **Article Selection**

The following news media outlets were examined, the Wall Street Journal, USA Today, the New York Times, and the Washington Post. Previts, Bricker, Robinson, and Young (1994) used the Wall Street Journal in their content analysis studying organizational behavior, prompting the use in this study. Riff, Lacy, and Fico (2014) used USA Today, as well as the Washington Post, in their content analysis that examined media messages, prompting the use in this study. Kioussis (2004) examined media coverage and the implications of that coverage using the New York Times, prompting that publication to be used in this study. The news coverage that is generated about these organizations, in regards to these specific situations was examined. Any articles that were found from these organizations but were op-ed in nature, or not completely about the situation at hand were

excluded from the study. Additionally, any coverage exploring consumer reaction to the organizations during these times will be coded and analyzed.

While searching for articles to be used, articles were eliminated based on their lack of relevance to this specific aspect of the business and specific situations where these organizations spoke out about and became involved with politically and socially charged issues. The articles had to first be about the exact situations that have been outlined above of these two organizations speaking out about and becoming involved with these politically and socially charged issues. Articles that were not discussing these situations and the suspected impacts of these situations will be eliminated for the coding.

**Keywords.** While searching for articles about these topics, a variety of keywords were used. The keywords were used in some combination with one another to find the articles from the publications specified above. The organizations' name were used for all cases, as well as the words "political stance," "speaking out," "backlash," and "situation" were used. For the case of Chick-Fil-A the words "marriage equality" and "gay marriage" were also used. For the case of Hobby Lobby, the words "religious exemption" and "women's rights" were also included.

**Articles Used.** After the searches were conducted, there were 165 articles appropriate to code. Of this number, 100 of the articles were about Hobby Lobby and 65 were about Chick-Fil-A. Of the 65 Chick-Fil-A articles, 12 came from the Wall Street Journal, 16 from USA Today, 17 from the New York Times, and 20 from the Washington Post. These articles were selected and found using the keywords noted above, with articles that were not relevant to the specific instances eliminated. There were 18 found from the Wall Street Journal, 19 from USA Today, 32 from the New York Times, and 34 from the Washington

Post. Overall, 38 articles were found but then eliminated from being coded in the study because they were not deemed appropriate for the purpose of this research.

These same aspects were analyzed and coded for Hobby Lobby. Of the 100 articles that were coded for Hobby Lobby, 15 were from the Wall Street Journal, 25 were from USA Today, 30 from the New York Times, and 30 from the Washington Post. In the initial searching, 25 from the Wall Street Journal were found, 31 from USA Today, 39 from the New York Times, and 34 from the Washington Post. Overall there were 29 articles were found in the initial search but were then eliminated from the study because they were not deemed appropriate.

### **Coding Sections**

**Sources in Support or Opposition.** Through looking at the amount of sources that were given in stories that were in support or opposition of an organization, it will be clear if this was done evenly. Additionally, the number of sources that have no stance at all and are simply factual will be counted. This will help to know what the overall number of sources are and in knowing that, generate a percentage of which sources are on what side. If the number of sources favors one side or the other, this will help to show which of these sides is being favored by the journalist, and in turn is the way that this story is being framed.

Sources in support were determined through looking for the journalist quoting another person saying words like: good, glad, strong, support, and other positive words. Sources in opposition were determined through looking for the journalist quoting another person using words like: unfortunate, mean, wrong, boycott, and other words like these that have negative connotations. The other sources that were left were counted through

finding places where the journalist was quoting another person with words that were explanatory in nature and had a neutral take including things like stating facts or telling details.

**Positive or Negative Language.** The language that the journalist used in each story will help to show the underlying tone that is put forth and framing that goes along with this. By noting the number of times that negative language was used, without a source, the journalist opinion will become more present and detectable.

The words that were counted in this section were specifically words that the journalist chose and used, not words that were used when quoting others. Words that were considered positive in nature were counted, with words such as good, appropriate, right, correct, strong, accepting, and others like this. Negative words were counted as well with words such as bad, wrong, unfair, discriminatory, exclusive, stagnant and other words like this.

**Persuasive or Informative Language.** The nature of the language written was also explored in the way that it did or did not encourage any action from the readers. The number of persuasive versus informative by nature words were counted to give information about if the journalist framed the story in a way that put forth a call to action for the reader. This, in turn, gave further information about the framing that was employed.

The journalists use of persuasive and informative language were also counted. The persuasive words that were counted were words such as should, support, accurate, inaccurate, confident, right, wrong and other stronger words like this that would lead the audience to feel a certain way about the situation at hand. Informative words were also

counted including words such as said, did, informed, was and other words that do not have a stronger connotation attached to them.

## Results

After coding and analyzing the articles that were gathered from Chick-Fil-A, the following results were drawn. Beginning with the sources that were found in the article, there were more overall negative sources in the articles ( $M = 1.31$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ) than positive sources in the articles ( $M = 1.15$ ,  $SD = 1.24$ ). The difference that was found was not statistically significant at  $p = .07$ . Looking back at our H1a: When framing these situations, news media will present more negative sources than positive sources. The data did not provide evidence in support of this hypothesis because while journalists used more overall negative sources instead of positive, even though the difference was in the predicted direction.

Moving to the negative and positive author specific words in the story, there were also more negative words ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ) than there were positive words ( $M = 1.78$ ,  $SD = 1.84$ ). The difference was significant with  $p < .001$ . This aspect helps us to see that H1, as mentioned above, is true because in this instance the journalists used their own words to make the stories negative. Connecting this back to H1b: When framing these situations, the words of the authors will be more negative than positive, the data does not support this hypothesis because the difference that existed was not statistically significant.

This is connected to the next section that was studied with authors using persuasive words versus informative words. Specifically there were more informative words used ( $M = 5.69$ ,  $SD = 1.85$ ) than there were persuasive words ( $M = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ). Unlike the

positive and negative author words, this did have a statistically significant difference of  $p = .004$ . Connecting these two, this means that overall the authors were fair in their reporting on Chick-Fil-A when using their own personal words, as they were typically not more negative than positive and were significantly more informative than persuasive. In connection to H1c, when framing these situations, the words that the authors use will be more persuasive in nature than informative, we can see that this hypothesis was seen as false. Instead, there was a statistically significant difference with the informative words occurring more frequently than the persuasive.

Combining these different findings to look to H2: when framing these situations, news media will side with the liberal or more socially progressive side of the argument, we can see that there is evidence to support this hypothesis, but not in the way that journalists use their own words to show this side of the argument. News media use the sources that they have and the other information about the situation to put forth and side with the liberal side of the argument.

Moving on to the Hobby Lobby case, looking to the positive and negative sources, were there more negative sources or sources in opposition ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 1.89$ ), than there were positive sources or sources in support ( $M = 0.72$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ). This was proven to be a statistically significant difference  $p = .021$ . Similar to Chick-Fil-A, this means that the author used quotations and other people's opinions and facts to be able to show the negative aspects of this story and the large amount of opposition that existed in the general public. These findings prove H1a (when framing these situations, news media will present more negative sources than positive sources) to be true.

Differing from that of Chick-Fil-A, this is connected to the data that was found for negative and positive author words. There were significantly more negative author words ( $M = 6.12$ ,  $SD = 2.64$ ) than there were positive author words ( $M = 1.14$ ,  $SD = 1.88$ ). These findings were significant  $p = .005$ , meaning that the authors, typically, not only used quotations, but also in their own language portrayed the story and the actions of the organization as negative. Relating these back to H1b: When framing these situations, the words of the authors will be more negative than positive, we can see that this provides evidence in support of the hypothesis.

Even though authors were more negative in their telling of this story, they were not statistically significantly more persuasive than informative, but instead more informative than persuasive. There were statistically more informative words ( $M = 10.98$ ,  $SD = 2.47$ ) than there were persuasive words ( $M = 5.52$ ,  $SD = 2.06$ ). This was a statistically significant difference  $p = .05$ . Similarly to Chick-Fil-A, when we look at this in connection to H1c, when framing these situations, the words that the authors use will be more persuasive in nature than informative, there was no evidence to support this hypothesis, and the opposite occurred more often. Relating all of these findings back to H2: when framing these situations, news media will side with the liberal or more socially progressive side of the argument, the hypothesis was once again supported.

The analysis also compared the four publications that were studied to one another to see the similarities and differences that existed between them. When it came to overall sources in opposition, the publications were similar: Wall Street Journal ( $M = 1.07$ ), USA Today ( $M = 1.34$ ), New York Times ( $M = 2.66$ ) and Washington Post ( $M = 1.52$ ). Comparing all of the publications, there was a significance of  $p = .08$ , meaning that there was no

significant difference. Because the difference was not statistically significant, it can be concluded that the publications are similar in these regards. The publications were also similar in their use of negative author words: the Wall Street Journal ( $M = 4.26$ ), USA Today ( $M = 4.90$ ), the New York Times ( $M = 5.81$ ) and the Washington Post ( $M = 4.72$ ). The difference between the groups was not statically significant,  $p = .90$ , meaning that the difference was not significant. It is again clear that the publications were similar in their use of negative words, because there is not a statistically significant difference that exists. Connecting these findings to H3: news media will be similar in their portrayal of the organizations, the hypothesis was supported. However, it does seem that while all publications were similar and portraying the situations in the general same way, the New York Times was more extreme in their reporting in all aspects than the other publications.

Through combining the results from Chick-Fil-A and Hobby Lobby it is possible to answer the research questions. It is important to also look back to RQ 1: how do the news media frame organizations speaking out about politically and socially charged issues? Based on the findings, it is clear that the news media will favor the side that supports equalities and freedoms and will not support any sort of discrimination, many times meaning that the news media will side with the more liberal or socially progressive side.

RQ 2 asked: do the news media frame the issues similarly to other media organizations or does it differ depending on the publication/source? This research question is directly connected to the H3, which was confirmed. Because of this, the answer to this question is that news media do frame these issues similarly to other news media publications. There are some slight differences, for example the New York Times was more

aggressive in the negative aspects of the situations that they put forth to their audience. However, the similarities that existed were much stronger than the differences.

### **Discussion**

From the results that were gained from this content analysis, it is clear that the majority of the responses to both the Chick-Fil-A case, as well as the Hobby Lobby case were overwhelmingly negative. What is interesting is that the differences that exist between the two cases are quite large. The response from the general public to Hobby Lobby was much more negative than the response to Chick-Fil-A.

In connection to H1a (when framing these situations, news media will present more negative sources than positive sources), H1b (when framing these situations, the words of the authors will be more negative than positive) and H1c (when framing these situations, the words that the authors use will be more persuasive in nature than informative) the findings provide evidence to support this hypothesis. In both cases, the sources and quotations that the journalists used in their stories were overwhelming negative. Because of this, the stories gave more information about and had a more negative tone and focus, showing that the perception was that the larger part of the general public was in opposition of what the organization was doing. However, while the journalists did use negative words when sharing their own opinion, as well as persuasive language to encourage the audience what to think, these types of writings were not statistically significant to show that this happened more than the positive and informative words.

From this we can understand that while journalists did favor the negative or opposing side, they still tried to be fair, in many instances, to only show this through the

source's opinions and try to keep their own biases absent. However, it is still important to note that while there was not statistical significant to show that journalists showed their own negative opinions, there were still many instances where they did happen. When thinking of the jobs that journalists have, this is something that should, in perfect coverage, not be present at all, yet this was not the case. This is something that is vital for public relations practitioners to be aware of because they need to be considerate of the way that journalists will perceive businesses actions personally and how this will change the way that these journalists portray these cases and actions back to the public.

When moving to H2 (when framing these situations, news media will side with the liberal or more socially progressive side of the argument, especially if it is seen as more popular) in the cases of both Hobby Lobby and Chick-Fil-A there was evidence in support of this hypothesis. With both, by having the news media frame these situations negatively and opposing what the organizations did (with both expressing Christian, and, in turn, conservative opinions), the news media did side with the more liberal or social progressive opinion. Both of these organizations were going against different groups being able to have equal rights, which could have been the reason why they sided the way they did in these situations. However, it does not seem safe to say that the news media will always side with the more liberal or socially progressive side, but will instead side with the most inclusive opinions that are being put forward.

However, something that is important to note is that journalists primarily need to be informative in nature because they have to be able to tell the audience about the situation, ensuring that they are able to understand what is going on. But, while this was much higher than the persuasive words in both cases, but especially in that of Hobby

Lobby, the amount of persuasive words was quite high. Meaning that, while there were more complicated things that needed to be understood, the authors were also using a lot of persuasive language, attempting to change the ways that the audiences viewed the situation and the organization.

Finally with H3 (news media will be similar in their portrayal of the organizations, all taking the side that has already been taken by other news media) it was clear that news media are very similar in the way that they put forward these types of stories. This is likely because once stories are first put forward, when the story is so politically and socially charged like these were, it is hard to take a completely different side without taking the risk of alienating some of the potential audience of the publication. Additionally, news media organizations have to also be careful in their portrayals of these stories because like the businesses they are reporting on, the news media organizations are also for-profit organizations. If they run a side of the story that is completely different than everyone else, they could be taking a stance of their own on the situation that they do not want to or feel comfortable taking.

It is important to also look back to RQ 1: How do the news media frame organizations speaking out about politically and socially charged issues? It was clear that the news media would side with the more socially progressive and inclusive argument, supporting or opposing the organization based on this. However, it is important to note that the news media also look to the way that the public is reacting to the situation, helping them to decide which frame to use, often times going with the more dramatic aspect of the story. When looking at Hobby Lobby and Chick-Fil-A, both of the stances that were taken by these organizations were stances that stood in opposition of a portion of the public and

were potentially discriminating. The news media opposed these organizations and framed these situations as something that was very negative.

RQ 2 asked: Do the news media frame the issues similarly to other media organizations or does it differ depending on the publication/source? From the data that was found, the news media do seem to frame issues similarly to the way that other news media organizations do. This was likely especially the case because the news media organizations need to be careful as to how they cover these politically and socially charged issues as to not take a stance of their own. It would be interesting to examine if this was the case for organizations speaking out of topics that do not elicit such polarizing reactions or issues and stories that are not so politically and socially connected.

One of the most important reasons that there was a difference in coverage is because Hobby Lobby was implementing a change in their policies that some see as discrimination. Instead of simply saying how they feel about birth control and this aspect of women's health, they changed the benefits that they would be offering their employees. This is something that has a much greater impact on the employees at this organization, especially because this is an organization that employees people all around the United States. Additionally, this is something that the organization did against something that the federal government had put into place. While this fight and strength is something that could sit well with some of the public, it is a level of power that others did not feel that an organization deserves.

This is further emphasized by the lack of statistical significance in the difference of author negative words that were positive and negative, as well as persuasive and informative, with the case of Chick-Fil-A. While this was seen, by many people, as

something that was negative and this opinion was seen more aggressively, it was not bad enough that journalists were willing to give up their need to report unbiased and tried to only use quotations and other people's words to tell the stories. However, with Hobby Lobby taking something away from their employees, simply because of the owner's personal religious beliefs, many journalists got rid of their need to not show their own opinions and were more negative and persuasive in nature, not only telling their opinion, but many times persuading the audience to feel the same way.

Another reason that could explain why the public responded more extremely to Hobby Lobby than they did to Chick-Fil-A is that Hobby Lobby does not have as prominent of a history as a conservative Christian organization as Chick-Fil-A. While Hobby Lobby has been known for being closed on Sundays, Chick-Fil-A has consistently been more open with their conservative practices in the way that all of their employees act and treat customers. Specifically, there are certain ways that employees are trained in the way that they should conduct themselves while at work, for example, responding to "thank you" with "my pleasure" and other outwardly kind things, that could be seen as unexpected, like this. The same cannot be true for Hobby Lobby. Because of this, while the public did react largely to Chick-Fil-A, in some ways people were not surprised that they spoke out about marriage equality because of how closely they have stayed to their Christian values in everything that they do as a business. However, because Hobby Lobby has not been as open about these practices, when they went to such a strong extreme, the public was more surprised by this because it is not something that they would have expected.

However, while these two cases were covered by publications in somewhat great length, something that is important to consider is the fact that there have been other

organizations that have gone through similar things that have not gotten nearly as much coverage. For example, Gabbatt (2012) discusses the way that JCPenny faced backlash after hiring Ellen DeGeneres as their spokesperson. The organization One Million Moms created a campaign to encourage people to boycott the organization until they stopped having the spokesperson, because she is a homosexual woman. In addition, most recently, Nichols (2015) explains that Campbell's Soup faced backlash after they began airing a commercial that showed a family made up of two homosexual fathers and their son. Interestingly, these two companies, as well as others who have been in the same situation, did something that was similar to the organizations analyzed in this study; they took a stance about a socially charged issue. However, even though they did this, these organizations did not face the large reactions that Hobby Lobby and Chick-Fil-A did. There is no clear reason why some organizations would face a larger reaction than others. But, this is something that is important to remember. It is not guaranteed that the news media are going to cover these situations as extremely or as significantly in all cases. Instead, there are many organizations that will not be covered by the news media much at all. Organizations need to be careful when putting themselves in these situations because there is no clear, confident telling both the way that the public will react and the way the news media coverage will impact those reactions.

### **Conclusion**

Organizations have many factors to think about when it comes to making sure that they are creating a brand that people want to support. As consumers become more aware of the practices and histories of the organizations that exist, they are making more

conscious purchasing decisions. This has prompted organizations to need to be more active in the issues and topics that are most important in our nation. Customers want to know that the organizations that they are buying products from care about our world and are making positive impacts, doing their part to support the different aspects of social change that they believe in. With this, consumers have begun to see organizations speaking out about and taking stances on socially and politically charged issues. While this is not something that we have seen a lot of, it is a practice in business that has been growing in the recent years. However, this choice to speak out is not something that consumers always respond to well. Because of this, when organizations are considering taking a stance on an issue that is politically or socially charged, it is not a decision that can be taken lightly.

Through the content analysis that was completed, studying the news media coverage of Hobby Lobby and Chick-Fil-A, it was clear that the majority of the articles were negative in nature. These articles not only uses negative sources to support their tone, but the authors of the articles showed their own negative opinions and in some cases, used persuasive words to encourage the readers to feel the same way about these situations. Knowing this, organizations have new considerations that they have to make before following in the footsteps of organizations like Hobby Lobby and Chick-Fil-A. With the many competitive and growing markets that exist, organizations are constantly being pushed to reach new heights and to do things for consumers that may not have done before.

## Key Considerations

As consumers continue to be more informed about and invested in the brands that they are buying from, the decisions that organizations need to make also grow in intensity. Schwabel (2015) explained that millennials care deeply about organization authenticity and the things that are being said by and about an organization. Younger generations are becoming the focus of many brands, as the percentage of consumer bases that they make up is continuing to grow. A new area of organizational culture and brand presence that consumers have begun to see emerge in some areas is that of organizations becoming involved in politically and socially charged issues. Consumers seemed to become incredibly interested in brands that speak out and have opinions, showing passion about the world and making a difference.

In this change of organizations having an almost human voice though, there are new questions that arise about the appropriate steps and practices that organizations should have in place in these many different regards. When deciding what is right for organizations to do, specifically in regards to where they stand on politically and socially charged issues, the following document outlines key considerations that should be made. Through considering these different aspects discussed below, organizations can feel more confident about what lies ahead and what decision is truly best. These considerations encourage organizations to think more deeply about why they are going to make a certain stance and the different people that will be impacted.

- ***Type of Stance:*** There are many different types of issues and stances that organizations can speak out about and become connected to. The politically and socially charged topics

that are discussed and cared about in our nation are vast, all ranging in level of importance and level of polarization. Of those many issues, there are some that the large majority of people agree on and know is an issue. For example, the large majority of people agree that society needs to stop things such as; child abuse, domestic violence and sexual violence. If organizations were to speak out or do something against these issues it is incredibly unlikely that they would receive any backlash. On the contrary, they would be applauded for the positive difference that they are making in the world.

However, there are also many issues that have many different sides and opinions surrounding them. Issues such as marriage equality and women's rights, as we saw with Hobby Lobby and Chick-Fil-A, are issues that have people on all different sides and elicit a very passionate response. With issues like these, organizations need to think more strongly about what the best decision is. If organizations choose to speak out or act in accordance with one of these issues, they are more likely to get some sort of reaction from the public that includes negative feedback and people who do not support what they are doing. While organizations can try to make as much of a calculated move as possible, with issues like these it is much harder to be able to know how the public will react.

- **Action Alterations:** Building off the type of stance that the organization is taking and the issue that it is tied to, the most important thing that organizations need to examine before taking a stance about a controversial issue is whether this stance is something that will prompt a policy change or will simply let an opinion be known. In making the decision to speak out, is this something that is connected to some sort of policy change or a change in future habits and behaviors? Or, on the contrary, is this decision something that is only

connected to an opinion and the organization will move forward no differently? The answer to these questions is something that could have a large impact on the way that the public responds to this decision, both positively and negatively.

The U.S. is a country where people are allowed to have their different opinions, this being something that the country prides themselves on. Because of this, if there are no discriminatory or excluding actions that are taken, people are open to and fairly accepting of people have opinions that are differing then their own. While the majority of reactions to Chick-Fil-A and its portrayal in the news media were negative, it was fairly manageable compared to the reaction to Hobby Lobby. This is the difference that exists when an organization simply has an opinion or belief and when an organization puts an action in place that is not accepting of others who do not have that same opinion. If organizations are planning to implement some sort of action change with their stance, they should be prepared for a more extreme reaction and larger potential negative consequences.

**- Reasoning:** All decisions that organizations make need to be strategic. If organizations want to be able to feel confident in the things that they are doing and the responses that will come from them, it is necessary to think all things through and have a clear reason why they are doing what they are doing. Speaking or acting out in connection to a politically or socially charged issue is not different. Organizations cannot simply choose to do this because they have seen other organizations do so or because they randomly decide they should. Instead, there needs to be clear, strategic reasoning for not only why they are deciding to speak out or act in connection to an issue, but also reasoning for why the specific issue that they have chosen and why this specific time. These are factors that need

to exist and need to be told to the public to help to explain what they are doing. This will help the public to understand the organization's perspective and see things more easily from its side. Through opening up this perspective and helping the public to see this, it will encourage the public to respond more positively to what they are doing.

Looking back at Chick-Fil-A and Hobby Lobby, both had very specific reasons for speaking out and for taking the actions that they did. For Chick-Fil-A, the CEO Dan Cathy was in an interview and was asked his opinion on the subject, giving reason for why the organization would speak up about the topic. Additionally, with Hobby Lobby, The Affordable Care Act, prompted the organization to have to change the health insurance for their employees, which is something that they did not want to do. This change prompted them to act out to fight for what they believed was right. Both actions that the two organizations took were prompted by something and the organizations had specific reasons for doing what they did. If organizations do not have a reason for doing what they are doing in getting involved in a politically or socially charged issue, this will prompt more question from the public and could cause the reaction to be more negative.

- ***Employee Impact:*** This decision is something that has the potential to severely impact the organization. While this is not necessarily what will happen, when the potential even exists it is important to consider how this will impact all of the employees. Employees could be impacted in many different ways from decisions like this. Depending upon the way that the general public responds to the decisions that are made by the organization, the work environment and experience of employees could change significantly. For example, when thinking of the two cases that were studied in this analysis, the general public responded

with protests, in some instances. When this happens, the employees who are working at the store have to deal with hostile working environments and disgruntled customers for something that they did not do.

In order to have a strong business, it is necessary to make sure that all employees, no matter what level of the company they are at, have an enjoyable working environment, making sure that they are encouraged to do the best job possible. However, if a decision similar to that of Hobby Lobby or Chick-Fil-A is made, there are many people at the lowest levels of the organization who are dealing with the reactions from the public most frequently and most aggressively. The employees who are dealing with this are going to have a hard time feeling comfortable and excited about working for the organization when the people who are leading organizations are making decisions that they do not have to deal with the consequences of, as much as the other people who are working for the organization. When any sort of crisis strikes or an organization comes under any sort of scrutiny, it is vital that organizations stick together.

Another factor to consider when it comes to employee impact is the difference in opinion that employees could have from the business in regards to the specific topic they are speaking out about. Specifically Bhassin (2012) discusses how Chick-Fil-A's decision strongly impacted some of the employees at the organization who identified as homosexual. While these employees knew that this organization is run by a conservative family, this reached a new level when they spoke out so explicitly about how they feel about marriage equality. This puts these employees in an uncomfortable position. They have to consider if they have to keep secrets from the organization and their coworkers about this aspect of their life, out of fear of how they will be received. Additionally, they

have to consider if they should continue working for the organization, knowing they oppose something that is so close to them, personally. Organizations need to consider the many different ways that all of their employees could possibly be impacted, to know whether this is something that could cause more harm than good.

- ***Prominent Customer Demographics:*** All decisions that organizations make need to be done after first consider the customers. If an organization truly wants to be successful, their customers have to be their top concern. In conducting business in this way, organizations are going to know the demographic information of their most typical and loyal customers. Through knowing this information, assumptions can be made and customers can be asked about how they feel regarding certain issues. It is possible that organizations can have differing views about issues and topics than their regular or loyal customers. However, especially when it comes to issues that people typically feel particularly passionate about, organizations need to strongly think about if they want to speak out about these issues as it could cause them to lose customers. Feeling passionate about issues is important and having this human side, as an organization, is something that can be seen as a positive thing. However, if the topic that the organization is considering speaking out about is something that their regular consumers differ from them on or do not like, then this is something that they probably want to stay away from. The most important concern of the organization should be in keeping the consumers happy.

In addition to considering the current customer, organizations also need to think about their target customers, the consumers that may not already be making purchases but the organization hopes will soon. These customers could differ from their more typical

customers. Even if these possible customers are thinking about purchasing from an organization, if this organization then speaks out about something, saying or doing something that they do not agree with, they are not going to follow through with their purchases and are instead going to find a competing organization. A thorough evaluation needs to be done by the organization of the topics that their consumers and potential consumers care about, feeling confident that what they are considering aligns with this, before they move forward.

Chick-Fil-A is an organization that was created and more primarily operates in the south. Being in the south, a higher amount of the customers who eat at Chick-Fil-A are more conservative and often times more religious in their beliefs and political backings. Because of this, the organization was not taking as big of a risk, as far as alienating customers, through speaking out in this way because it is likely that many feel the same way or are at least used to this being the majority opinion in the area where they live. Hobby Lobby, on the other hand, is an organization that has a wider reach and in turn has a wider customer demographic base. This could be one of the reasons that the reactions to the organization's actions were more extreme than that of Chick-Fil-A, because there were more customers that were not in support of what was happening.

- **History:** When thinking of how to brand their product and the overall image that an organization wants to have, they try to make decisions that are consistent and make sense. If an organization wants consumers to be able to connect with them and truly have a feel for their brand and organizational "personality", it is important to have a history that aligns with the mission and vision of the organization, sticking to this. If an organization is trying

to make a decision about whether to speak out about a certain issue or topic, one of the easiest questions that needs to be answered is whether the different aspects of the situation align with the organization's history and the things that have been done in the past.

To begin, organizations need to know if the issue that they are considering speaking out about is one that they have previously had a connection with in any way. Is this issue something that they have been connected to in any capacity? If the answer to this is no, then the organization needs to think about why this is something that they are now going to associate themselves with. For example, organizations need to find a way that they are connected to this issue. Do they have an employee or a large customer base that is deeply connected to the issue? If there is no connection that can be made at all, then when the organization does speak out or connect themselves to the issue, it is going to raise questions. Consumers, especially those who disagree with what the organization is doing are going to wonder why it is that the organization has chosen to do this, and likely feel as though this is an action that is not driven by genuine emotion and care for the issue, and instead believe the organization is going through with these actions for some sort of gain.

In addition to this, the organization needs to think about if the stance that they are taking and the side of the issue that they are aligning themselves is one that they have a history with. There are many organizations that align themselves with issues in some way through the corporate social responsibility that they participate in. Additionally, there are organizations, like Chick-Fil-A that are known for being a very Christian organization, using this in the way that they conduct their business. When this is the case, the issues that are related make sense for the organization to become connected to. This is something that

seems genuine and is something that they are doing because they believe in it. However, if the stance is one that goes against something that the organization has done in the past or the reputation that they have, this is something that is going to confuse consumers.

Organizations are going to be at a higher risk of losing customers that they have had in the past after these consumers find this information out, especially if they strongly disagree.

It is very important for organizations to have transparency and honesty when they are dealing with their consumers. In trying to create and build strong consumer relations, it is important that actions seem genuine. Yet, at the same time, in order to have successful business, all decisions that are made need to be strategic and calculated. Especially when there are risks behind the decisions that are being considered, organizations need to think about the ways that they have acted in the past and really determine if the actions that they are making align with that. In doing this, consumers are able to feel more confident that they truly know the organization that they are buying from, creating a more loyal customer base.

### **Summary**

Overall, when it comes to a decision like this, organizations cannot feel 100 percent positive that the reaction from the public will be a certain way. However, there are ways to gain more control in these situations and to be able to feel more confident in the business moves that are taken. After evaluating these considerations, organizations can know what decision is more appropriate for them and what they should anticipate moving forward.

## **Outside Evaluations**

I. Toby Smalley, Senior Vice President, HYC Advertising, Chicago, Illinois

### **Credentials**

Having over 25 years of advertising experience working with organizations such as Procter & Gamble, Maytag, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Deutsche Bank, Scudder Investments and Bank of Montreal on a global basis, I have seen the shift in the consumer/brand relationship change over time. I currently work in advertising and have worked in all different aspects of the marketing, advertising and public relations field. I formed a professional relationship with Molly when she was an intern for one of the clients of the agency that I work for.

### **Evaluation of the Project Methodology and Approach**

I find Molly's approach to not only be thorough, but the specific cases she sites- Chick-Fil-A and Hobby Lobby span the spectrum of social issues and the role of core values in these social issues. Chick-Fil-A is a very values-driven company, and always has been. Their point-of-view is truly rooted in their core values, thus allowing them to speak in a transparent and forthright manner on the subject. For Hobby Lobby, their motives for taking a stand on a social issue did not seem to be as values-driven, but more profit-driven. I believe covering both of these examples shows Molly's diligence in selecting demanding subject matter.

### **Contribution to the Field of PR & Marketing**

Having reviewed Molly's Project, I firmly believe her project will provide meaningful conversations around the role of PR in building a organization/brand's long-term growth, and I have found her approach and coverage of the subject very thorough.

As the role of PR and consumer's interactions with brands/organizations continue to evolve, Molly has chosen a very dynamic, interesting and broad subject- the role of Public Relations when it comes to social issues. As the consumer/brand relationship continues to become more transparent and the conversation between brands and consumers becomes more of a dialogue, how organizations approach these issues will become increasingly important. Molly has uncovered this insight and covered it thoroughly thus far.

II. Maryann Rowe, Consumer Strategist and Insights Consultant, Purpose from Krk, Chicago, Illinois

### **Credentials**

As a practicing researcher at Ipsos, I was responsible for the account management of the Kraft/Nabisco business and the day-to-day oversight of their six-person project team. It was during this time that I was awarded the company's highest ratings in methodological development/application, survey design and advanced analytics for three consecutive years. As a Insights specialist within PepsiCo, I was the Innovation and Beverage brands consultant for Global trends, U.S. micro trends, Millennials, Boomers and the Indulgent need states. In 2010, I created my own Insights consultancy which dedicates 20% of its resources to the non-profit sector, specifically education-based programs. My professional relationship with Molly was formed from an internship that she had with work colleagues of mine.

### **Evaluation of the Project Methodology and Approach**

Regarding the method, I completely understand and agree with Molly's choice of media outlets. This was especially true as the articles that were selected are available in

print, digital and social formats to link back to your points in the introduction. I thoroughly enjoyed how Molly approached and organized the coding section. I don't see this type of multi-polar approach often and it's critical in reducing blind-spots or misinterpreting the data.

### **Contribution to the Field of PR & Marketing**

I recently reviewed Molly's project submission. I found the topic to be fascinating and extremely timely for our industry. This is a somewhat new business decisions that businesses and organizations are facing right now and is an area where there is not as much insight as could be useful. A point that was especially useful was found where Molly supplied inputs into a "Best Practices" check-list or handbook to the reader. These are a lovely contribution to the field and something that would surely help organizations that are working through these aspects of business.

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## Appendix A

## Coding Book

<b>Concept Being Explored</b>	<b>Coding System</b>
<p>Sources: Number of sources from each side explaining the situation.            - If equal amount, the author is showing equality and fairness, if more for one or the other showing favoritism.</p>	<p>Number of sources in support of the organization (words like; good, glad, strong, support or other positive words like this)            Number of sources in opposition (words like unfortunate, mean, wrong, boycott, stop and other words like this)            Number of other sources or sources explaining things without clear support or opposition (stating facts, explaining sides or story, etc.)</p>
<p>Tone: Number of times that the article implied or said that what the organization was doing was positive or negative.            - Specifically in the way that the author wrote and the words he or she chose.</p>	<p>Number of times positive words used (majority positive words; good, appropriate, right, correct, strong, accepting)            Number of times negative words used (majority negative words; bad, wrong, unfair, discriminatory, exclusive, stagnant)</p>
<p>Nature of the language: Number of times that the author used language that is meant to persuade or inform, helping us to know the overall approach of the article.            - More informative will be linked to fairness and equality, more persuasion less so.</p>	<p>Number of times persuasive words used (majority words like should, support, accurate, inaccurate, confident, right, wrong)            Number of times informative words used (majority words like said, did, informed, was)</p>