Corporate Activism

Cody L. Strange

Utah Valley University

Introduction

March 16, 2015 CEO of Starbucks Howard Schultz asks his employees to talk about race relations to try and show his support for the racial issues in America. This PR campaign came with massive blowback as the already underpaid baristas were having to talk about controversial topics with their customers.[[1]](#footnote-1) This is just one example of many of companies that have participated in pushing their employees to act regarding the company’s beliefs, no matter what the individual might believe.

Corporate activism is unethical and immoral for the following reasons. Corporate activism involves using one’s power as a company to try force your ideals onto someone else. It involves using a corporation’s power to persuade governments to create legislation to force people to act in agreeance of your social or political beliefs. And lastly it casts those who disagree with your social or political beliefs as a negative person.

Background

It is important to define what Corporate Activism or CA is before continuing to why it shouldn’t be practiced. The most important thing to know is the difference between CA and CSR or Corporate Social Responsibility[[2]](#footnote-2). The main difference between CA and CSR is “when” each of them take place and the methods that form as a result. CSR occurs when a company is actively participating in a social/political way that is *already* widely accepted. These are more often smaller and less controversial topics. Some examples would be voting, treating everyone respectfully, being honest. They are not quite legal issues, but they are responsibilities that could get you in trouble with your peers for not upholding. Because corporations are no more than a group of people, they should be held to and should be expected to promote these social views just like everyone else.

CA occurs when a company is actively participating in a social/political way that is *not* widely accepted[[3]](#footnote-3). While it isn’t very controversial whether we should be a more honest person, it is very controversial whether America is a racist country. Another example would be abortion, which is one of the most controversial topics now a days. Because many people will disagree with the company’s stance on one of these topics, they may have to use their power as a corporation to get the employees or consumers to act in favor of the company’s beliefs. This can is usually done between two methods, the top-down method, and the bottom-up method[[4]](#footnote-4). The bottom-up method involves the company “encouraging” those directly involved with them to agree with the company. The top-down method is when the corporation tries to get the government to pass legislation for those who the “encouraging” wasn’t enough.

# Evidence

The first reason why CA is unethical and immoral is because it forces the ones ideals onto another. Whether it be a single CEO of a company or the corporation, the bottom-up method of CA puts pressure on those who are directly below you to go along with your social/political views whether or not the individual agrees with you. “These bottom-up strategies normalize the issue in the marketplace and thus, overtime, can help produce, support, and/or accelerate a change in its value system.”[[5]](#footnote-5) This quote from an article done on corporate activism explains the goal for the bottom-up strategy quite well. The article recognizes that the issue isn’t normal and wants to normalize it. A great example of this would be on same sex marriage, this “issue” isn’t what many consider to be normal. In the name of doing social good, the company decides to take upon itself to “normalize” the issue. I’m not referring to promoting treating gays and lesbian as equals, as that would fall under CSR. It isn’t a very wide controversy that we should treat everyone equal no matter how they live, so long as they are law abiding citizens. The controversy strikes when the company promotes the *act* of same sex marriage. This is because many people, especially certain religious groups do not believe in same sex marriage. It can create issues when the beliefs that the company is pushing go against what you believe. An example of this would be when Starbucks started their #racetogether campaign that pushed baristas to talk about race relations. What were you supposed to do if you didn’t believe that America was a systemically racist country? The company is telling you to act based on their beliefs even if it goes against your own.

The second reason why CA is unethical and immoral is because it uses the corporation’s power to try and get the government to create legislation on their ideals. This is what is known as the top-down strategy. To start explaining the unethicality of it here is a quote from the article *The Activist Company,* “Companies may therefore have to resort to disruptive tactics to create coercive influences if change is needed quickly.”[[6]](#footnote-6) These “disruptive” tactics the article is referring to “the extent to which a target of an influence attempt feels that not complying with the wishes of the source will lead to adverse consequences for him or her.” This is another quote from the above article. Examples of these disruptive tactics are when companies threaten to boycott states, like when North Carolina passed laws saying that you had to use the restroom of the gender that you were born with and multiple corporations refused to do business in North Carolina until they reverted the law[[7]](#footnote-7).

The last and final reason why CA is unethical and immoral is because it casts those who disagree with your social or political beliefs as a negative person. The reason for this is because when the companies are so sure of their own ideals that they are willing to do anything to push them, problems occur when others disagree. Anyone who isn’t actively for your cause must be against it, and if they are against it, they must be a terrible person. Because your cause is just and is for the good of all society then those who disagree must be against the good of society. The logic of the ends justifies the means kicks in, anything is justified in the name of stopping those terrible people who disagree with you.

Opposition

I know that many would disagree with me, using the argument that there are some instances that used correctly CA can be both ethical and immoral. The problem of this is that no matter how good your cause may be forcing those who don’t believe the way you do to follow your ideals is a problem. That is the main difference between CA and CSR, in CA your forcing your ideals onto another party, in CSR your reenforcing the ideals of the other parties. CSR is for widely accepted topics, so you don’t have to force anyone to believe something they already agree with.

Conclusion

To restate my previous claim, CA is both unethical and immoral. For the following reasons of it uses corporate power to force your ideals onto someone else. It uses corporate power to persuade governments to create legislation. And lastly it casts those who disagree with you as a negative person. While CA may be problematic CSR on the other hand can be used to uplift society and is a great alternative.

References

Last Name, F. M. (Year). Article Title. *Journal Title*, Pages From - To.

Last Name, F. M. (Year). *Book Title.* City Name: Publisher Name

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)