

Teaching Note

OMG! He Said What? (A&E'S Duck Dynasty Situation)

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Critical Incident Overview

This incident deals with the controversial interview in *GQ* magazine with Phil Robertson, founder of West Monroe, LA-based Duck Commander and family patriarch on A&E's "Duck Dynasty" reality television show. Phil Robertson, a devout and conservative Christian, made some highly inflammatory comments about homosexuals and African-Americans in the pre-Civil Rights era. The A&E network suspended Phil Robertson amid lots of PR social media and print commentaries and then reinstated him. The student is asked to assess how A&E handled the PR controversy and to provide suggestions for how any company should handle an outspoken celebrity.

This critical incident is appropriate for the Public Relations component of an Integrated Marketing Communications course and specific Public Relations Management courses. It may also be used in a Principles of Marketing course after the chapters on the Promotion Mix have been covered.

Research Methods

This descriptive critical incident is based on secondary research, primarily print and online newspapers. No information in the incident is disguised.

Learning Outcomes

In completing this assignment students should be able to:

1. Assess a public relations controversial situation for implications to the firm's reputation.
2. Prepare several strategies for minimizing damage to a firm's reputation and relationship with all publics involved.
3. Conduct a stakeholder analysis of the A&E/Robertson situation.
4. Discuss the best practices that should be followed by a firm when dealing with an outspoken celebrity.

Discussion Questions

1. Should A&E have suspended Phil Robertson because of his remarks in the GQ interview? Why or why not? (LO 1)
2. Should A&E have reinstated Phil Robertson? Why or why not? Which of Grunig & Hunt's Four Models of Public Relations appears to have been used by A&E? (LO 1)
3. How much has this controversy damaged the show for viewers? For the network? For sponsors? (LO 2)
4. Prepare a stakeholder analysis of the situation. (LO 3)
5. Recommend what else A&E should have done to better manage this brouhaha. What should any firm do to manage an outspoken celebrity? (LO 4)

Answers to Discussion Questions

1. Should A&E have suspended Phil Robertson because of his remarks in the GQ interview? Why or why not? (LO 1)

An earlier version of this critical incident was used in two classes, Marketing Strategy, and Marketing Foundations (graduate level) during the Spring 2014 semester. Undergraduates commented: A&E tried to make people feel better; one can't please everyone; A&E threw the "family" under the bus; do not believe everything on TV; it is not like he was some big businessman – just a woodsman from Louisiana. One graduate student noted that in her country, Chinese TV and companies suspend people until they say the politically correct thing. Another grad student noted: yes, they have the right (to suspend him); though they should focus on the bottom line and not take a stand (they are a business). NOTE: The Supreme Court decision on the Hobby Lobby case "expands the right of corporations to be treated like people, part of a trend that may be contributing to the rise of economic inequality" (Applebaum, 2014). The bottom line may no longer be the only goal of the corporation.

This version was used in an Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) class on September 18, 2014. One student stated, "He just expressed his opinion. Nothing wrong with that." Several responded that other people do this all the time. Another student thought the interview "went a little far with talking about genitals. Someone else said, "May have more impact [on me] if I had read the article." One said it "got blown out of proportion."

We feel that A&E was right to suspend Phil Robertson. Despite the conservative complaining about Phil's "rights" being infringed, no constitutional rights were indeed infringed upon. Phil Robertson signed a legal contract; A&E had every right to enforce the terms of the contract. As Columnist Leonard Pitts noted: "So Robertson's rights were not abridged because his network slapped his wrists. Those are the rules we play by. That's how America works." ... "There is nothing in the First Amendment that says a private company can't fire you" (Pitts, 2014).

2. Should A&E have reinstated Robertson? Why or why not? Which of Grunig & Hunt's Four Models of Public Relations appears to have been used by A&E? (LO 1)

Battaglio (2014) commented that “Both sides had major incentives to put the controversy behind them. *Duck Dynasty* is A&E’s top-rated show; ... the Robertsons were at risk as well. ... [no star] went on to bigger success after telling his boss to take this job and shove it.” Our undergraduate students commented: A&E wanted to make a buck; did it for the ratings; doesn’t matter what employees do as long as they make money; if not suspended, would this have been so big (controversial)? A grad student noted: seemed like they caved on their principles. One response from an IMC student in September 2014 was that they should have fired him. Another said A&E did not want to lose the money. The authors agree with this statement. It isn’t just the money but the fact that A&E had a number one rated show in a market that is very competitive.

It was rumored that CEO Nancy Dubuc had received death threats from people for suspending Robertson (Report, 2013). Reuters reported that the quick reversal “was not entirely surprising, given the financial commitment at stake. The controversy was also seen as a test for the entertainment industry’s appeal to audiences in the heartland of America” (‘*Duck Dynasty*’, 2013). Conservatives like Senator Ted Cruz and Governor Bobby Jindal were happy about the reinstatement (‘*Duck Dynasty*’, 2013). Also the network announced “it intended to launch a national public service campaign ‘promoting unity, tolerance and acceptance among all people’” (Elber, 2013a & 2013b; ‘*Duck Dynasty*’, 2013). “The channel’s interest is in ratings and revenues, not refereeing social discord.” Its ratings may have been affected by the brouhaha as it averaged 1.5 million viewers over December 16-22, versus 2 million viewers the week before (Elber, 2013b). The authors have yet to see the promised public service campaign.

Grunig & Hunt (1984) developed four models of public relations, describing different ways an organization communicates with its stakeholders. Each is summarized below:

- Press agent/publicity – one-way communication using persuasion/manipulation
- Public information model – one-way communication using press releases to distribute information
- Two-way asymmetrical model – imbalanced two-way communication using persuasion and manipulation
- Two-way symmetrical model – two-way communication that involves negotiation, conflict resolution, and mutual respect (Waddington, 2013, Table 1, p. 2)

It appears that A&E did use Grunig & Hunt’s fourth model, two-way symmetrical communication, as they met with the family and advocacy groups (NAACP, GLAAD, and others). It appears that conflict resolution and negotiation tactics were used by A&E. Part of A&E’s released statement noted, “So after discussions with the Robertson family, as well as consulting with numerous advocacy groups, A&E has decided to resume filming *Duck Dynasty* later this spring with the entire Robertson family” (‘*Duck Dynasty*’, 2013). While the network was disappointed with Phil’s statements, it realized that the family did espouse its own view of unity, tolerance, and forgiveness (‘*Duck Dynasty*’, 2013).

3. How much has this controversy damaged the show for viewers? For the network? For sponsors? (LO 2)

One undergraduate thought that little damage had been done to the show. S/he said that some people just watch the show for the comedy aspect. One author used to watch the show from time

to time just to see what the marketing buzz was all about and enjoyed some of the silliness. He has not watched the show since the controversy ended. Whatever appeal it might have had is no longer there. An IMC student thought that probably a lot of people were offended, so the show lost viewers.

The new fifth season on A&E debuted January 15, 2014. There was a 28% drop in viewership compared to the record-setting 11.8 million fourth season premiere the previous August. The Wednesday premiere drew 8.5 million reviewers, a respectable number and better than most television shows do today (Wilstein, 2014). Viewership numbers continued to fall; only 6 million people watched the season-five finale on March 26th, compared with season finales of 8.4 million (2013) and 9.6 million (2012) (Aguilera, 2014).

The sixth season premiered on June 11, 2014, with a special guest, Governor Bobby Jindal of Louisiana. Ratings continued to slide, as only 4.6 million people tuned in to this first episode (Jenkins, 2014). The second episode attracted only 3.9 million viewers. Some critics blame the low numbers on Robertson's comments while others argue that "low numbers are a natural progression in the relatively short life cycle of a hit reality television show" (Weber, 2014). One IMC student noted, "People could just be getting tired of the show," thus the loss is not related to the controversy. The controversy may have affected A&E's overall primetime viewership which is down 26 percent (Schneider, 2014, p. 12).

The seventh season began on November 18, 2014, with only 2.62 million viewers tuning in (Kondolojy, 2014; Wikipedia, 2015). The season ended on February 25, 2015, with 2.51 million viewers watching the last episode (Kondolojy, 2015; Wikidpedia, 2015). The Robertson clan's eighth season will begin on Wednesday, June 24, 2015 (Bibel, 2015).

Immediately after the controversy, little damage to the licensing empire existed. Teleflora and Under Armour distanced themselves from the comments. However, they did not cut their ties with the brand, nor did Walmart ('Dynasty' ducks, 2013). Walmart apparently saw a surge in sales of branded items after Robertson's suspension (Jenkins, 2014). Forbes estimated that "[by] the end of 2013, *Duck Dynasty* product tie-ins will have raked in a massive \$400 million in revenues" (O'Connor, 2013).

4. Prepare a stakeholder analysis of the situation. (LO3)

"Stakeholder analysis is a process of systematically gathering and analyzing qualitative information to determine whose interests should be taken into account when developing and/or implementing a policy or program" (Schmeer, 1999, p. 4).

The stakeholders involved in this controversy are:

- A&E
- The Robertson family and Phil specifically
- Advocacy groups including GLAD (Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders) and the NAACP.
- Right-wing conservatives/Christian conservatives

- The media (entertainment, news)
- General public

Referring to Table TN-1, Interest means how much each stakeholder is interested in the outcome of the controversy. Part of interest comes from how much each stakeholder is involved and invested in the reality show's success and the reactions of Americans to the controversy. Influence relates to the bargaining power of the stakeholder in the conflict's resolution. How much each stakeholder is invested in the show's success also affects the level of influence. Expectations refer to what each stakeholder would like to see happen as a result of this controversy.

Table TN-1

Stakeholder	Interest	Influence	Expectations
A&E Network	High (H)	H	Phil will honor contract & represent A&E well
Phil Robertson & family	High	H	A&E will honor contract & not punish Phil for comments
Advocacy groups	Moderate to High (MH)	MH	A&E will punish Phil for his comments against gays/lesbians
Conservatives	Moderate to High	MH	Phil's rights have been violated & A&E was wrong in suspending him
Media	Moderate to High	LM	More news! More controversy! Creates more social media buzz/hooks readers
General Public	Low to Moderate (LM)	LM	Entertainment for a short time frame; may or may not affect their viewership

In this situation, A&E and the Robertson family have the most at stake, so their interest and influence are both high. They have some similar expectations (contract honored) and some differences (what Phil can and will do). Advocacy groups and conservatives have moderate to high interest and influence. One wants to protect its people from discrimination and racist remarks while the other wants to protect Phil's free speech and conservative Christian viewpoint. The news media (traditional and social) have moderate to high interest in that the controversy creates news and buzz and may generate more clicks, likes and sharing, but they have low to moderate influence on the negotiation. The general public has some interest and some influence but its attention span is short.

**5. Recommend what else A&E should have done to better manage this brouhaha.
What should any firm do to manage an outspoken celebrity? (LO4)**

Mark Irion, president of a D.C. PR firm that specializes in crisis management, said that A&E had an opportunity through the show to "make a sincere statement" and "send a message about exactly what they'll tolerate – and what they won't" (Yahr, 2013, p. D-5). Crisis management expert Chris Lehane said the standard playbook/plan is: "The network issues an apology; the talent issues an apology; the network does something to show support for the community" (Yahr,

2013, p. D-5). One IMC student commented that A&E should have separated themselves from all the comments. As far as the authors know, A&E has not done any public service announcements as was promised. In hindsight, A&E should have done a better job of investigating the Robertson family. They may have discovered some clues about Phil's likelihood of making off-the-cuff remarks that could be inflammatory. This would have allowed them to put certain behavioral "handcuffs" in writing that might have minimized his opportunities for making such comments, and thus diffusing the controversy before it became one (see Klara, 2010, p. 13).

Managing negative publicity necessitates "quick and positive responses," especially today with online communication. If not, "a company's brand image can be tarnished virtually immediately as the result of ... negative marketing-related news," "By being responsive to customer [and public] complaints, companies can avert negative" word of mouth (Shimp and Andrews, 2013, p. 616). Some firms "have discovered that embracing their fallen endorsers [or celebrities] can be a winning strategy" as long "as the scandal doesn't involve violence, racism or outright cruelty" (Klara, 2010, p. 13).

General discussion

The following Timeline should be handed out to the student as they are reading the incident.

Timeline			
a) 3/21/12 <i>DD</i> premier	b) 3/18/13 <i>GQ</i> interview online c) A&E suspends Phil	d) 3/27/13 A&E reinstates Phil	e) 1/15/14 Season 5 premiered

Sources: a,e) Wikipedia, 2015; b) Magary, 2013; c) Hibberd, 2013; d) Elber, 2013b

Then it is recommended that the instructor first have the students break up into small groups of two to four and discuss the first question. Ask each group to summarize their discussion and share with the rest of class. The instructor may comment on their discussion points. The instructor then should briefly write on the board Grunig & Hunt's four models and direct the students in their groups to discuss question two. Again, have the groups summarize their discussions and comment on their responses.

Question three should then be discussed and the ratings numbers then shared with the small groups. Ask them to reconsider their responses in light of the numbers. Move on to having each group identify the stakeholders and then the class as a whole create the stakeholder analysis with the instructor writing things on the board.

The instructor then asks question five and the small groups discuss their responses. The professor may also want to have students discuss:

- Comparing this to other social pressure situations that impacted celebrities, for example, one member of the Dixie Chicks dared to criticize President Bush and the war. A hate

campaign followed (source: <http://www.thenation.com/blog/173271/ten-years-ago-today-dixie-chick-dared-hit-bush-war-and-hate-campaign-began>).

There were some excellent editorial cartoons about the controversy. There was no room in the incident to include one, so we suggest going to <http://www.gocomics.com> and looking up these cartoonists: Jeff Koterba, Omaha World-Herald (~12/29/13); Omman, The Sacramento Bee (12/20/13); Steve Kelley, New Orleans Times-Picayune/Creators Syndicate (12/25/13); and Walt Handelsman, Baton Rouge Advocate (1/1/14). The instructor may want to locate one of these cartoons and display it during or after discussion. The instructor then should share with students' points from the epilogue below.

Epilogue

Additional news and items for discussion include the following:

- Duck Commander will be the new corporate sponsor of the Shreveport, LA-based Independence Bowl (College Briefs, 2014).
- Just after Phil Robertson was reinstated, a 2009 YouTube™ video surfaced showing Phil at a Georgia sportsmen religious meeting, who advised his audience that men should marry girls as young as 15 or 16 years old (Hill, 2014).
- Phil Robertson spoke at the Republican Leadership Conference in New Orleans in late May 2014. He encouraged GOP leaders to get God and “called for re-evaluating the current view of separation of church and state, said that the discovery of DNA had disproved the idea of evolution, and told the GOP to give up a debate over the Affordable Care Act” (as everyone dies and no health care package will prevent that) (Quinlan, 2014).
- Robertson spoke at a Christian event in Florida on Friday, March 20, 2015. He made the news again with “a bizarre speech in which he created a hypothetical scenario about an atheist being forced to watch his ‘little atheist daughters’ get raped and then having his penis hacked off and shown to him” (Mazza, 2015).
- The television series “qualified for over \$6 million worth of [Louisiana] government payouts for just the first three seasons” (O’Donoghue, 2014, p. A-2). “Hollywood tax credits cover 30 cents of every \$1 spent on film or TV productions in Louisiana” (‘Dynasty’ to cost, 2014, p. 1B). Despite some criticism, the lieutenant governor noted that the series has “generated something of a cottage tourism industry in West Monroe, where the show takes place” (O’Donoghue, 2014, p. A-2). Given Louisiana’s financial woes, the state’s film tax credit program has come under fire with elimination or changes being considered by the legislature. To combat this pressure, “the film industry released a study claiming that the tax credits generate thousands of jobs and billions of dollars in investment in Louisiana” (Bridges, 2015, p. 1A). “The state gave away \$222 million in film tax credits in 2014” (Bridges, 2015, p. 6A; also see Deslatte, 2015).
- “A musical based on the family featured in the “Duck Dynasty” reality TV series [Duck Commander Musical] is closing in Las Vegas, a little more than a month after it opened” (Mazza, 2015).

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