

# Chick-fil-A controversy over gay marriage

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PUR 6934- Public Relations Ethics and Social Responsibility

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## Executive Summary

In the summer of 2012, president and COO of Chick-fil-A, Dan Cathy, told the *Baptist Press* the company opposes same-sex marriage. His comments caused national outrage, as some strongly opposed Cathy's statements while others strongly supported them. Mayors of Boston and Chicago stated that Chick-fil-A was not welcome in their cities and a National Same-Sex Kiss Day was held at Chick-fil-A as protest. Politician Mike Huckabee backed Cathy's statements, and organized Chick-fil-A appreciation day in support of the organization. Cathy's statements resulted in business partners withdrawing their support, and some questionable social media practice occurred during the time of the crisis. Amidst all of this, Vice President of Public Relations, Don Perry, died of a heart attack.

This case is relevant in public relations practice due to the nature of the comments and Chick-fil-A's response, or lack of, afterwards. Cathy's statements and the actions surrounding put Chick-fil-A into question from an ethical standpoint. This case study analyzes the current philosophy Chick-fil-A seems to be following and makes recommendations as to what ethical principles they should be focusing on.

The case study also proposes social responsibility programs to better the Chick-fil-A organization and makes concrete recommendations. Possible programs include a consumer based contest where Chick-fil-A will make a one-time donation to the charity of the winner's choice, a hunger relief program, and a program to lessen the degree to which their food is processed.

## The Ethical Event

Ever since the first Chick-fil-A opened in 1967, the company has made clear the dedication it has to Christian values. All of its locations are closed on Sundays in order for employees to have the opportunity to attend church. The corporate purpose of Chick-fil-A is “to glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us” and “to have a positive influence on all who come in contact with Chick-fil-A” ("Executive biographies"). The organization is one of the most popular fast food chains in America, specializing in the boneless breast chicken sandwich, and reported 4.6 billion dollars in sales for 2012 ("Company fact sheet").

Chick-fil-A received some public scrutiny when it became known that they were distributing millions of dollars in donations to anti-gay groups. Chick-fil-A was scrutinized for making large donations to organizations such as Focus on the Family, National Christian Foundation, and Serving Marriages Inc. (Allison, Maza & Schwen, 2011). In mid-July of 2012, Chick-fil-A triggered a firestorm sparked by a statement from their current president. Dan Cathy, Chick-fil-A president and chief operating officer, appeared on "The Ken Coleman Show," on June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2012, and started controversy when he stated, “I think we’re inviting God’s judgment on our nation when we shake our fist at him and say we know better than you as to what constitutes a marriage. And I pray God’s mercy on our generation that has such a prideful, arrogant attitude that thinks we have the audacity to redefine what marriage is all about.” After the initial backlash of the remarks, Cathy followed up with the *Baptist Press* on July 16<sup>th</sup>, fueling the fire with statements such as how he is very “supportive of the family — the biblical definition of the family unit. We are a family-owned business, a family-led business, and we are married to our first wives,” (Aarthun, 2012).

Cathy's statements caused an outcry, with supporters on both sides of the debate. Many individuals took to social media to voice their opinions on the matter. Ed Helms, well known actor on "The Office," stated via Twitter that Chick-fil-A lost a loyal fan. Boston Mayor Thomas Menino told the *Boston Herald*, "Chick-fil-A does not belong in Boston. You can't have a business in the city of Boston that discriminates against a population." Philadelphia City Councilman James Kenny wrote to Cathy telling him to take a hike and take his intolerance with him. Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel stated that Chick-fil-A's values are not Chicago values. The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) supported an idea for National Same-Sex Kiss Day to be held at Chick-fil-A restaurants on August 3<sup>rd</sup>. Organizers used social media to urge same-sex couples to participate in the event and post pictures and videos online. In addition, proponents of same-sex marriage organized a protest asking people to donate the approximate cost of a Chick-fil-A meal, roughly \$6.50, to gay and lesbian rights groups, according to the GLAAD (Aarthun, 2012).

While Cathy's statements caused uproar amongst those in support of same-sex marriage, Chick-fil-A also received support from a large audience. Former Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee became well-known for his support of Chick-fil-A during this time. Huckabee sparked the idea for Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day, which encouraged people to visit a Chick-fil-A and purchase food there. Chick-fil-A Appreciation Day took place on August 1<sup>st</sup>, just two days before Same-Sex Kiss Day. Sales were quoted to be record-breaking, but because the event was not a Chick-fil-A promotion, the company did not provide specific sales numbers (Grinberg, 2012).

Some supporters backed Cathy's statements on the premise that they were in agreement with his beliefs, but others supported Chick-fil-A from a freedom of speech standpoint. As CNN commenter Doug Barger said, "I believe in religious freedom, because the owner's personal

opinions differ from mine points to a healthy society.” Matt Zieminski stood by Cathy’s statements saying he was unfairly attacked:

As a gay man, I say, let him not support gays. When the gay community and gay activist groups push on anti-gay people and organizations to change their minds and opinions via bullying or forced involvement, I fear it would make whatever accomplishments taste cheap like a greasy coin. Ultimately, the acceptance of the gay community and the right of gays to marry will not be achieved through violent means, physical and verbal, but through peaceful and honest negotiations. (Grinberg, 2012)

Cathy’s statements caused The Jim Henson Co. to sever its relationship with Chick-fil-A. At the time, Jim Henson’s Creature Shop toys were being included in kid’s meals, and as a result of Cathy’s comment, decided that it would no longer associate itself with the chain. As released on their Facebook page, the company stated, “The Jim Henson Co. has celebrated and embraced diversity and inclusiveness for over 50 years and we have notified Chick-fil-A that we do not wish to partner with them on any future endeavors,” (Talty, 2012). The company chose to donate the payment it received from Chick-fil-A to the GLAAD. Chick-fil-A officials released a statement that the kids' meal toys were taken out of its stores due to safety issues and mentioned nothing of the discontinued partnership (Wong, 2012).

The final component of Chick-fil-A’s ethical crisis involves them being accused of creating a fake Facebook account. Tech blog, Gizmodo, broke the news that Chick-fil-A was creating fake Facebook accounts as a type of offensive strategy to the Henson toys and gay marriage news. One of the users, Abby Farle, was shown on Chick-fil-A’s wall defending the organization and combating the overwhelming amount on negative comments. Farle’s profile picture was found by another Facebook user to be a stock image, a picture that is commercially

available. Farle's account was also found to be created just eight hours prior to her commenting on the company's page (Chan, 2012). Buzzfeed found an account by the name of Cordell Bunton, an account created a few months prior to the Chick-fil-A crisis, but was used for the sole purpose of defending Chick-fil-A. The account was deleted shortly after. Among allegations of the fake profiles, Chick-fil-A denied all of the fake profiles (Stopera, 2012). Tiffany Greenway, a spokeswoman for Chick-fil-A denied that the company had created fake accounts, but stated that the organization was well aware of the accounts (Gray, 2012). Regardless of whether or not Chick-fil-A was behind the fake accounts, the speculation itself amongst all of the other issues caused enough damage.

While the organization fell under fire for statements their president said, Chick-fil-A took to social media to defend their brand and the surrounding accusations. On July 19<sup>th</sup>, over a month after Cathy's original interview, Chick-fil-A stated on their Facebook page that:

The Chick-fil-A culture and service tradition in our restaurants is to treat every person with honor, dignity and respect – regardless of their belief, race, creed, sexual orientation or gender. We will continue this tradition in the over 1,600 restaurants run by independent Owner/Operators. Going forward, our intent is to leave the policy debate over same-sex marriage to the government and political arena...from the day Truett Cathy started the company, he began applying biblically-based principles to managing his business. For example, we believe that closing on Sundays, operating debt-free and devoting a percentage of our profits back to our communities are what make us a stronger company and Chick-fil-A family. (Sebastian, 2012)

Chick-fil-A released two more posts via Facebook regarding the controversy. On July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012, the organization posted stating that the accusation of impersonating a teenager with a fake

Facebook profile is 100% false. The second, on July 27<sup>th</sup>, was in regards to the Jim Henson Kid's Meal toys. The post stated that Chick-fil-A voluntarily chose to withdraw the Jim Henson Kid's Meal puppets for potential safety concerns on Thursday, July 19 and that on July 20, Chick-fil-A was notified of the Jim Henson Company's decision to no longer partner with us on future endeavors.

Amidst the controversy, Vice President of Public Relations, Don Perry, died suddenly of a heart attack. Don Cathy's statements sent Chick-fil-A into a downward spiral comprised of multiple ethical concerns from a public relations perspective. The issue gained the attention of many national news organizations, such as CNN, US News, and ABC among others. CNN even has a website dedicated to the issue, titled "Chick-fil-A Debate." The website has complete coverage on the fallout with links to various sections such as business, controversy, first amendment, religious freedom, videos, and iReports ("Chick-fil-a debate"). As touched on in the explanation of the crisis, there was a great deal of social media attention. Many of the protesting efforts as well as efforts in support of Chick-fil-A were organized and expressed through social media outlets. Analyzing Chick-fil-A's actions can be beneficial to organizations, public relations practitioners, and the field of public relations, as the issues Chick-fil-A faced fall in a grey area of appropriate ethical behavior among corporations.



## Why this is a Public Relations Ethical Issue

Public Relations expert Virgil Scudder, stated in a video for the *Public Relations Strategist* that many leaders of companies voice strong opinions. “After all, it’s not the meek who get to the top,” he said. Scudder mentioned that expressing controversial views can be “dangerous as it can take a toll in terms of alienating, employees, shareholders, customers or government officials,” (Scudder, 2012). While Cathy’s statements supported Chick-fil-A’s mission, he associated all franchises, employees, and other individuals associated with the organization with his statements that they might not have necessarily agreed with. Cathy’s interview not only caused Chick-fil-A as an organization to be blindsided, but the public relations team in particular. While Chick-fil-A is not the first, nor the last to suffer from this kind of a situation, conducting a case study on the fall-out is particularly interesting from the ethical perspective of public relations.

The issue discussed clearly falls under the conflict of interest core principle of PRSA’s Code of Ethics. The core principle of conflict of interest states that actions and circumstances that may appear to compromise good business judgment or create a conflict between personal and professional interests should be avoided (“Public Relations Society”). Cathy clearly intertwined his personal beliefs into the organization’s mission and expressed them in a way that threatened the organization and its publics. One who follows PRSA’s Code of Ethics should build public trust by avoiding or ending situations that put one’s personal or professional interests in conflict with society’s interests (“Public Relations Society”). Cathy did nothing to diffuse or stop the situation with his interview. When the story broke and all of the surrounding accusations came into play, Dan Cathy never released a statement. To this day, Cathy has had

nothing to say regarding the matter. Cathy refusing to comment or release a statement on the issues surrounding his interviews harmed the organization and made it more difficult to rectify the situation and their reputation.

Chick-fil-A also seemed to disregard another core principle, disclosure of information. This principle states that one should act promptly to correct erroneous communications for which the member is responsible. Chick-fil-A only released three statements on Facebook in regards to the controversy, and did not do so in a timely manner. They did not act promptly, and in delaying their response time, and frankly, lack of response, the court of public opinion had already been decided.

While there are some clear-cut issues with this Chick-fil-A case, there are also some arguments supporting Cathy's behavior. There is the argument that one should not let their personal feelings get in the way of business, but when Chick-fil-A's purpose is to glorify God, is there a conflict? Cathy's statements raise the question of whether or not it is ethical for a business to take such a strong stance for something. Organizations face a challenge of being true to their mission and beliefs without offending other groups' sensibilities or negatively affecting human rights. Technically, Chick-fil-A remained loyal and fair in this controversy, two core principles of the PRSA Code of Ethics. Cathy's interview was faithful to what Chick-fil-A represents and was fair in respecting opinions and supporting the right to freedom of expression. Chick-fil-A expressed no problem with the Same-Sex Kiss Day held at their restaurants and notes on their Facebook that, "The Chick-fil-A culture and service tradition in our restaurants is to treat every person with honor, dignity and respect – regardless of their belief, race, creed, sexual orientation or gender."

Every business leader who wants to express strong personal views should learn the lesson that he or she needs to work closely with the public relations team so that they can communicate personal objectives without embroiling the company in potentially damaging controversy. Expressing your opinions and personal views too strongly can result in the mis-characterization of your organization, as we saw with Chick-fil-A. While Cathy may not have maliciously made those statements and purposely put Chick-fil-A in a tough position, he did so in an arguably unethical fashion. Public relations practitioners must weigh the advantages and disadvantages of businesses becoming closely aligned with a certain viewpoint and supporting that viewpoint through monetary donations and public statements. Practitioners must communicate this to top-level management and make sure all communication efforts support the agreed upon business decision.

## Ethical Theories

When putting this case into a philosophical context, a few theoretical perspectives are relevant. As Leeper (1996) wrote, “The predominant ethical system in the public relations field is a situational perspective,” (Leeper, 134). This creates a problem because any action can be argued to be justifiable and it also causes public relations to be a reactive function as opposed to proactive, as we see with the Chick-fil-A case.

For the most part, Chick-fil-A is an ethical organization. They serve the needs of a variety of different populations, in many different geographical areas, and vow to treat everyone with honor, dignity and respect regardless of their belief, race, creed, sexual orientation or gender. In analyzing Chick-fil-A’s current ethical state, it is clear that the theory of communitarianism can be applied. While communitarianism is considered to be a good ethical approach, Chick-fil-A is practicing communitarianism in an unethical sense. While communitarianism is focused on balancing the self-interests of the organization with the interests of the community, Chick-fil-A pursues its self-interests more so than the overall community interests, by spending the majority of its efforts supporting the Southern Baptist and overall conservative communities.

According to Sullivan’s (1965) partisan values versus mutual values:

Mutual values” that reflect respect for human rights should be viewed as “higher” than “partisan values” which can lead to too much obedience and commitment. Partisan values lead to extremes, and often result in relying too heavily on the views of the organization, while ignoring or minimizing the viewpoints of others. Ethical public relations practice lies where these two values converge. (Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, p. 199)

Chick-fil-A is too closely associated with conservative Christian groups and needs to open itself to the entire Chick-fil-A consumer market rather than solely valuing the conservative community.

As a result of this issue, Chick-fil-A should adjust its current practice of communitarianism, but also consider egoism and value ethics. In the food industry, it is appropriate to be focused on profit and reputation, so the enlightened self-interest focus of egoism is something that Chick-fil-A can effectively practice. Members of the Chick-fil-A public relations team should carefully evaluate the long-term effects of decisions and behaviors. Value ethics incorporates the ideas of Albert Sullivan, mentioned above. An adjustment of the partisan and mutuality values to better value the rights of their publics, which are to provide accurate and complete information, participate in decisions that affect them, and have their rights respected by others, will allow Chick-fil-A to become a more ethical organization overall and limit controversies such as the one studied (Gower, p. 11).

## Proposing a Social Responsibility Program

The Chick-fil-A organization is already well-known for its involvement in corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs and is one of the most social responsible organizations in its industry. The Chick-fil-A website contains a Social Responsibility section featuring tabs on “Giving Back” and “Environmental Stewardship,” (“Social Responsibility”). In “Giving Back,” Chick-fil-A focuses on three key areas: youth & education, local communities, and leadership & family enrichment. The main program involved with leadership and family enrichment is WinShape, a foundation sponsored by Chick-fil-A. WinShape provides foster homes, marriage retreats, and children camps. The program is closely tied with religious values as Chick-fil-A is, and does not allow non-traditional couples on their marriage retreats.

Making recommendations for Chick-fil-A’s CSR programs is a challenge. In order for CSR programs to be effective, they should be tied into an organization’s mission and be relevant to the values of the organization and the type of business it conducts. Attempting to reconstruct Chick-fil-A’s CSR programs to rectify Cathy’s statements and the fall-outs following without compromising the mission or values of Chick-fil-A is the biggest challenge. Without strategic planning and careful thought, implementing a new CSR strategy could do more harm than good to Chick-fil-A.

The first step is for Chick-fil-A to determine whether they would like to fully embrace marketing themselves as a faith-based organization or if they find it more beneficial to neutralize themselves a bit. That being said, a few personal recommendations come to mind. Chick-fil-A previously used its dollars to shape public and political discourse by funding organizations against gay-marriage and gay-rights. The company has since discontinued its donations to those organizations. Chick-fil-A’s website has a section on “Recent Giving Stories” which includes

videos on real-life examples and news updates. I recommend that on a yearly basis, Chick-fil-A hosts a contest open to the public where people submit videos explaining why Chick-fil-A should donate to the organization they recommend. A winner is selected and Chick-fil-A donates a one-time gift to the winning organization.

- **Strategy-** Incorporate a yearly contest centered around social media channels where X amount of dollars are given to a charity of the winner's choice
- **Tactics-** Release a number of press releases, use social media channels to create awareness of contest, use social media channels to promote contest, create a YouTube channel for everyone to see the contest entries, place contest information on website, place contest information in all Chick-fil-A restaurants
- **Evaluation-** Monitor the “buzz” and awareness around the contest via social media channels and distribution of collateral (cognitive outcome), set a goal for number of entries hoped to receive, set a goal for the amount of interactivity among the contest (people sharing videos, voting for videos) (behavioral outcome)

Secondly, Chick-fil-A should become more involved in hunger relief efforts. Chick-fil-A values community so much and involves itself with many community stewardship efforts, but does not have anything associated with hunger relief. The closest thing is that they donate food for those in need, particularly to sick or special needs children, such as the Children's Hospital of Atlanta and Camp Hope (“Community Involvement”). Involving themselves in hunger relief efforts would tie nicely into their corporate purpose and values of the organization. Not only can Chick-fil-A help this effort by providing meals and sandwiches, but also through donations.

- **Strategy-** Each Chick-fil-A restaurant involve itself in a local community-based food program or national program operating locally
- **Tactics-** Press releases, prepare media kits, provide local schools, food banks, and other appropriate organizations with media kits, inform national organizations such as Children's Hunger Relief Fund and United Way of Chick-fil-A's plan and possibly do interviews with them, conduct human interest stories and place on social media channels
- **Evaluation-** Monitor distribution of collateral, message awareness within the community as well as the involvement nationally (cognitive outcome) , measure amount of food distributed and eaten (behavioral outcome), measure amount of monetary donations (behavioral outcome), measure the rates of food insecurity locally (behavioral outcome), measure participation numbers (behavioral outcome)

Lastly, Chick-fil-A should work to minimize the plethora of ingredients in their products. Chick-fil-A has a reputation of offering fresh products that are of better quality than most fast-food chains. However, Chick-fil-A's food items are extremely over-processed, as their signature sandwich contains close to 100 ingredients (Hari, 2011). Before that reputation is ruined and Chick-fil-A risks a potential crisis, they should actively engage in making their products less processed and thus healthier for consumers.

- **Strategy-** Rework ingredients in breaded Chick-fil-A menu items
- **Tactics-** Work with food experts to determine appropriate ingredients that meet the goal of a less processed food item without sacrificing the taste and overall products Chick-fil-A offers, conduct clinical trials for taste-tests, communicate the change on a national and local level through press releases, social media postings, interviews



- **Evaluation-** Successfully decreasing the amount of ingredients in main Chick-fil-A products (behavioral outcome)

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