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Strategic Communications Analysis of Chick-Fil-A

1. Introduction

We decided to analyze Chick-Fil-A, an American fast food chain from Georgia that now has over 3,000 locations and netted \$11.3 billion in 2023. Chick-Fil-A stood out to us because of its unique workplace culture, scholarship program, and controversy over donations to anti-LGBTQ+ groups. The company's culture has both been a point of pride and has come under scrutiny, thus making Chick-Fil-A's strategic communications an excellent case to analyze.

Chick-Fil-A has been recognized as a standout in the fast food industry for its dedication to excellent customer service, emphasized by its "culture of care." Notably, Chick-Fil-A was founded (and still run) by the Cathy family, who are devout Christians, and incorporated explicitly Christian messaging into the core of the company. Chick-Fil-A's mission is "To glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us. To have a positive influence on all who come in contact with Chick-fil-A." All Chick-Fil-A locations are closed on Sundays so employees can rest, spend time with their families, and worship "if they choose."

2. Communication Analysis

Internal

Chick-Fil-A internally emphasizes the importance of team work through frequent team bonding activities hosted by the management team. Franchise owners are considered independent operators, therefore each Chick-Fil-A has different ways they contribute to the building of a community among staff members. However, recognition and appreciation of employees are common among most chains, to reinforce their values of "integrity, excellence and teamwork".

For example, some Chick-Fil-A employees are rewarded through the employee of the month system or through holiday parties, where they can be placed in a raffle and receive gifts. This perk creates a feeling of value as an employee and therefore, incentivizes the staff to maintain a high standard of work. Another incentive that motivates employees are the competitive wages, including opportunities to receive performance-based bonuses or opportunities like becoming a trainer for new employees, which has higher wages.

Furthermore, Chick-Fil-A's Remarkable Futures scholarship program is an opportunity for employees to receive partial or full scholarships for college "to help more than 93,000 Team Members pursue a higher education and achieve their remarkable future." This reflects that within the workplace, the company cares about its employees' futures, which creates a stronger sense of loyalty to the chain compared to other fast food places. Another method for building up strong leadership in the chain is through the Chick-Fil-A leadership program, a 24 to 36 month program where you travel and learn how to operate a Chick-Fil-A restaurant post-graduating with a Bachelor's degree or with five years of leadership experience. The program is designed to identify, develop, and empower future leaders who embody the company's culture and values, thereby contributing to the long-term success and sustainability of the organization. This opportunity not only is attractive to many employees, but also sets up the feeling that Chick-Fil-A values its employees and wants them to be successful.

Chick-Fil-A internally communicates its Christian values by being closed on Sunday for all employees. The idea of not working on Sunday stems from the biblical commandment found in Exodus 20:8-11 which suggests that you should set aside one day and not work to honor the Sabbath as a day of rest and worship. While denominations of Christianity may not all believe this, Chick-Fil-A makes it clear to employees that Christianity is a large part of the company's

guiding values and practices. Chick-Fil-A's conservative values are also demonstrated through rules related to appearance in the workplace, that can be found in their team member handbook. Tattoos, which are often considered taboo for the Christian religion when extremely visible are "only permitted under the following guidelines" which include little to no visibility of them. Makeup is expected to be "neutral" and nail polish is only permitted if it is a "solid color, not chipped and in good taste," while male-specific employees are not permitted to wear polish. Today, many male-identifying individuals wear nail polish but these rules limit employees' form of self-expression to gender norm standards. These standards establish that as a worker, you must live conservatively in the days you work and how you dress. Overall, these guidelines are corporate and seen across all chains, which show how Chick-Fil-A's executives want to establish a consistent culture rooted in conservative values.

External

Externally, Chick-Fil-A's core goals are publicly outlined in their mission statement: "To glorify God by being a faithful steward of all that is entrusted to us. To have a positive influence on all who come in contact with Chick-Fil-A." From this statement, it is evident the external communication of the brand aligns with the aforementioned internal emphasis on Christian values stemming from Biblical contexts. The mission statement further explains Chick-Fil-A's goal to create and foster a "culture of care" prioritizing honor, dignity, and respect. Outlined within this culture are the values of service, togetherness, the notion of being purpose-driven, and the intent to pursue future endeavors with adaptability. These values attempt to externally communicate a sense of safety in community, a move that some have criticized to be ironic considering Chick-Fil-A's notable religious tie-ins that can be deemed exclusionary of various identities. There is also prominent external communication regarding operating hours as

Chick-Fil-A makes it known to customers that it will be closed on Sunday for religious observation, a move that affects both internal and external operations from a service perspective.

Recently, Chick-Fil-A has launched #TheLittleThings ad campaign, externally communicating to potential consumers that the brand is committed to uplifting the joyful stories of both Team Members and customers. Among the stories featured on commercial video spots include a kid who bonded with a Team member over experiencing a heart transplant, a special chicken delivery for a child whose father was serving in the Marines, and a Team Member who memorized the order of a father for his weekly football game watch parties. The hashtag is also communicated to be used by customers to share their own positive stories interacting with Chick-Fil-A team members for an opportunity to be featured on the brand's social media channels. Externally, this brand communication further highlights Chick-Fil-A's "culture of care" that emphasizes the company's commitment to being a part of the local communities in which it resides. This tactic contributes to the overall organizational culture of the company by instilling connections between Team Members and customers that strengthens both sides' overall affinity for Chick-Fil-A.

Finally, Chick-Fil-A has a notable foothold in numerous philanthropic endeavors that display them to have a charitable external front. These endeavors are headed by a novel policy launched in 2020 that intends to focus on the company's charitable donations in the areas of hunger, homelessness, and education. Known as the "Chick-Fil-A Foundation," this outreach program donates to approximately 300 local charities domestically and intends on distributing over nine million dollars annually. Additionally, Chick-Fil-A has pledged to donate \$25,000 to a local food bank at each new location opening. Chick-Fil-A's president Tim Tassopoulos claims that "no organization will be excluded from consideration, faith-based or non-faith-based."

Communication from this external foundation and company president may help alleviate public concerns surrounding Chick-Fil-A's previous alleged homophobic and exclusionary values. The overall organizational culture of Chick-Fil-A will benefit from this external communications practice by increasing the company's aura of inclusivity and community.

3. Impact Assessment

Internal

The organizational culture of Chick-Fil-A is generally successful in establishing strong employee engagement and retention. Glassdoor suggests that 73% of employees would recommend working there to someone else, rating the cultures and values of the organization at 4.1. However, these high ratings may be rooted in the tendency for employees to be Christian and inherently more conservative in nature. Therefore, this culture may perpetuate feelings of exclusion against people who have less conservative appearances/identities shown through hair, nails and tattoos.

The corporation is also notorious for its homophobic beliefs, as they have donated millions to anti-LGBTQ+ hate groups and the president of Chick-Fil-A Dan Cathy, has made aggressive remarks against marriage equality. This culture often becomes common across the different independent chains. This is because when applying to become an owner of a franchise, one of the requirements is that you should "Play an active role in your church" and that owners are "devout Christians" who "must be willing to close the restaurant on Sundays and espouse Christian values." Therefore, some Christian owners may believe similar things that Cathy believes about the LGBTQ+ community. The 2012 Huffington Post report about how Kellie, a 23-year-old gay woman from Georgia experienced discrimination in the workplace at one of the two Chick-Fil-A's she worked at, which demonstrates how such conservative values may

perpetuate a culture that is hostile to certain marginalized groups. However, this is dependent on the franchise owner and how they choose to directly implement these corporate values into their work culture.

External

As aforementioned, external perceptions of Chick-Fil-A have been affected by an organizational culture that some deem to be restrictive of inclusivity and acceptance. From the company's initial mission statement referencing glory to God and public funding to anti-LGBTQ+ groups, external messaging communicated to audiences has been met with some disapproval. For example, there has been a prominent internet-run boycott on Chick-Fil-A led by LGBTQ+ activists in recent years that has negatively impacted their external brand image. Because Chick-Fil-A's organizational culture has stressed a value-driven environment, customers who do not align with the publicized values may feel ostracized from interacting with the brand. That said, Chick-Fil-A has made introductory strides in 2023 to becoming more inclusive of all customers by hiring a national vice president of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). This move has been met with backlash from some loyal conservative customers who now disregard Chick-Fil-A as "woke" and are organizing a boycott of their own.

Areas that Chick-Fil-A excels in are customer service excellence and community engagement. The company is externally known for employee friendliness and customer satisfaction derived from organizational training culture. The Chick-Fil-A foundation has donated tens of millions of dollars to various nonprofit organizations improving hunger, homelessness, and education; additionally, their promise to donate \$25,000 to local food banks upon opening new locations does not go unnoticed by communities. Chick-Fil-A's emphasis on cultivating positive employee-customer relationships and commitment to improving the

communities in which they service has led to favorable external perceptions that has formed a dedicated fan base.

4. Application of Communication Theories

Stakeholder Theory

The Stakeholder Theory is applicable to Chick-Fil-A's internal and external communication because the company actively fosters relationships with multiple groups, beyond just their customers. There is a strong focus on employees, which are rewarded with employee of the month recognition along with raffles, holiday parties, and bonuses. Ensuring a positive workplace environment is meant to increase morale (and performance) for this stakeholder group. The Remarkable Futures scholarship program demonstrates an investment in employees' futures and success. However, employees' self-expression on the job is limited, which can cause discomfort and tension. Additionally, LGBT-identifying individuals or others who feel unwelcomed by Chick-Fil-A's explicitly Christian, conservative brand, may feel averse to working for the company. The choice to prioritize the company's image and brand over the employees' self-expression and feelings of safety is intentional, but can damage relationships with other stakeholders, like customers who may choose to avoid Chick-Fil-A due to these practices.

Two-Step Model of Communication

The Two-Step Model of communication is relevant because even though Chick-Fil-A is a fast-food chain, the people who consume and broadcast their products can influence public perception of the company. The Two-Step Model focuses on external media that can influence audiences, including opinion leaders. S. Truett Cathy, the founder of Chick-Fil-A, became an opinion leader himself through his vocalization of his conservative beliefs, and donations to

augment them. On the other hand, social media content that calls attention to Chick-Fil-A's controversial values can also influence public perception, especially for younger, more liberal audiences. Thus, Chick-Fil-A's own communications (both advertising and statements) have a strong influence on perception, but the way the public reacts to those communications is also strongly impactful.

5. Strategic Communication Recommendations

The following 5 recommendations for Chick-fil-A's strategic communication would help them to improve or align their culture with their strategic objectives. As a disclaimer, these recommendations do assume an ideal world where Chick-Fil-A is willing to be more inclusive in order to reach a broader audience.

1. Broaden the Definition of "Culture of Care"

Recommendation: Encourage a customer service approach that goes beyond the traditional training methods and focuses on building authentic human connections. Make sure that all employees receive training on how to be inclusive and welcoming to customers from all backgrounds, without any discrimination.

Communication Channels: Internal workshops, revised handbooks with inclusive language, and external marketing campaigns showcasing diverse customers.

Impact: Encouraging a sense of purpose among employees can enhance their engagement, irrespective of their religious affiliation. This, in turn, may lead to a more inclusive environment for customers, which could help counteract any negative perceptions.

2. Revise External Communication Regarding Religious Values

Recommendation: In external communications such as mission statements, it is advisable to minimize the overtly Christian messaging while still maintaining honorable ethical standards. In

lieu of religious references, prioritize promoting shared values that are applicable to all, such as treating others with consideration, compassion, and fostering a sense of community.

Communication Channels: Tweak mission statement, website content, and external marketing communications.

Impact: This approach may be more appealing to a broader range of customers, as some may feel excluded by Chick-fil-A's current religious focus. Nevertheless, the company can still uphold its fundamental principles while taking this route.

3. Address the LGBTQ+ Controversy Proactively

Recommendation: Denounce previous donations made to groups that are anti-LGBTQ+ in a public manner and exhibit a strong dedication to inclusivity. Collaborate with organizations that advocate for the rights of the LGBTQ+ community.

Communication Channels: Ensure to publish press releases, social media statements, and company blog posts. Chick-Fil-A should keep an open channel of communication by engaging with media outlets that cater to the LGBTQ+ community.

Impact: Rebuilding trust with customer segments that feel alienated can help demonstrate the company's commitment to evolving values.

4. Leverage Communication Theory: Stakeholder Theory

Application: Acknowledge that Chick-fil-A's actions affect multiple entities, including its workforce, patrons, and the LGBTQ+ community. When making strategic choices, consider the necessities and principles of all of all stakeholders. It will be particularly useful to consider what type of influence these stakeholders have on the company's success. For example, consider the stakeholder group: customers who support the LGBTQ+ community. These stakeholders have a fairly strong monetary influence as well as prospective earned media influence on Chick-Fil-A.

Implementation: To understand how different groups of stakeholders feel about Chick-Fil-A's strategic communications, conduct surveys and focus groups. Based on the feedback, modify communication strategies as needed.

Impact: By more carefully considering the impact levels of the stakeholders that Chick-Fil-A is alienating or ignoring, the company might consider shifting its messaging to be more inclusive in order to foster more success for the company.

5. Leverage Communication Theory: Two-Step Flow Model

Application: The opinions of the public are often influenced by those who hold significant influence. Therefore, it is recommended to collaborate with a variety of influencers who can effectively promote Chick-fil-A's dedication to inclusivity.

Implementation: Identify content creators and other individuals who are influential on social media and are leaders in their communities. The selected people should represent the target audience and values of inclusivity of Chick-fil-A. Collaborate with these individuals to create marketing campaigns and outreach programs that benefit the community.

Impact: Using trusted voices in the LGBTQ+ space might make it easier for Chick-Fil-A to convince the general public of its commitment to changing its mission to be more inclusive, which would gain them more customers. This being said, shifting drastically in the other direction – away from conservatism – might alienate those who align with more conservative ideals. Considering this, choosing thought leaders who are neutral and would engage broad audiences (think Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson) might be a better call. Regardless, whether Chick-Fil-A wants to move far toward LGBTQ+ inclusivity or simply be more inclusive of non-Christian audiences, using a thought leader that represents their goal will be a useful strategic communication strategy to gain the trust of the public.

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