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Tiger Global Management, LLC

## SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment 'Blackfish' Crisis

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## ABSTRACT

SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment, Inc. is fighting for its survival post ‘Blackfish’, a documentary focusing on killer whale, Tilikum, involved in the death of three people, and inhumane treatment of orcas by the marine park. With an 84 percent drop in profits, celebrity criticism and widespread social media backlash, this crisis has now become a valid threat for SeaWorld. New CEO, Joel Manby, is working hard to win back the trust of the public and investors through multifaceted marketing campaign. This case study analyzes public response, ‘Blackfish’ effect on business, and SeaWorld’s attempt at reviving its’ former glory.

## OVERVIEW

SeaWorld Parks and Entertainment, Inc. crisis began with the screening of the controversial documentary ‘Blackfish’, directed by Gabriela Cowperthwaite, in 2013. The documentary focuses on the death of former SeaWorld trainer Dawn Brancheau by an orca, Tilikum, held captive by SeaWorld, and another controversy over the captivity of killer whales. The backlash from the documentary led to decline in attendance and raised concerns among the marine-theme park investors. In 2013, SeaWorld’s attendance fell by four percent and the price of its shares was cut in half in a year. According to the Wall Street Journal, "The company acknowledges that the fallout of Blackfish--which it says is a work of propaganda--is hitting attendance. However, Dawn Brancheau’s family released a statement and former trainer, Mark Simmons, who was part of the documentary, in numerous interviews backed SeaWorld, and called the documentary inaccurate.

Following the crisis, SeaWorld has taken an aggressive approach to reputation management by launching various campaigns to tell their version of the story. The marine park through these new campaigns is providing facts about its animal care efforts and “outlines its multimillion-dollar deal investments in killer whale research”. By the end of 2015, SeaWorld also announced that they would phase out its iconic ‘Shamu’ Show in its San Diego park in 2016 and launch a new orca presentation by 2017. “The new show will demonstrate how whales behave in the wild, with a focus on conservation efforts,” said SeaWorld CEO Joel Manby.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), which is campaigning against SeaWorld for years now, did not support the decision and called on the park to release its whales into ocean sanctuaries. “This move is like no longer whipping lions in a circus act but keeping them locked in cages for life,” said PETA, Director of Animal Law Jared Goodman. With the change of guard at SeaWorld, the announcement of the end of ‘Shamu Show’ and filing of a lawsuit against the California Coastal Commission over ban on the breeding of orcas, SeaWorld has now begun its journey on the road to recovery. However, what remains to be seen is if it can survive the blows of animal activists and the general public who want them to release the whales into ocean sanctuaries. The ‘Blackfish’ crisis has raised a question on whether animal parks such as SeaWorld have the right to hold wild animals’ captive for entertainment?

# BLACKFISH CONTROVERSY

## Overview of 'Blackfish' Crisis

The death of popular SeaWorld trainer, Dawn Brancheau, by 13,000-pound orca, Tilikum, in 2010 became the groundwork for the controversial documentary 'Blackfish'. The documentary, which was aired on CNN in 2013, portrayed "numerous practices related to orca captivity as unacceptable: SeaWorld's domestic breeding programs; the separation of calves from their mothers; the sizes of the orca environments; and the safety of the trainers themselves". The documentary questions SeaWorld's concept of keeping killer whales' captive for entertainment and "suggests that Tilikum had been driven to madness because of captivity for many years".

The controversial documentary was first premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on January 19, 2013. It was later produced by Magnolia Pictures and acquired by CNN Films, and was aired for a wider audience. Nearly 21 million watched the documentary on CNN and within two years, 'Blackfish' became a threat to the brand 'SeaWorld.' After the film was aired on CNN in October, there was a huge outcry to boycott SeaWorld on social media. According to CNN, "Protesters not only lined the streets outside SeaWorld Orlando in Florida, the company's flagship park, but also the streets of New York and Pasadena during the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and the Rose Parade".

SeaWorld faced a backlash from dozens of celebrities who tweeted negatively about the park. Many artists, including Willie Nelson, Trace Adkins, Trisha Yearwood and Joan Jett declined to perform at the theme park's concert series over the controversy. Social media was abuzz with many students and celebrities making videos and raising awareness of the documentary, 'Blackfish'. This inspired PETA to campaign against SeaWorld and today it has become one of the biggest threats to SeaWorld.

SeaWorld, in its defense, released a statement to CNN and called the documentary biased and one-sided. "Blackfish is billed as a documentary, but instead of a fair and balanced treatment of a complex subject, the film is inaccurate and misleading and, regrettably, exploits a tragedy that remains a source of deep pain for Dawn Brancheau's family, friends, and colleagues". Many have questioned SeaWorld's late respond to 'Blackfish' allegations. When the documentary debuted on CNN, the marine park came off as very defensive. They sent out emails to film critics against the "revelations in the documentary, pushed out op-eds lauding their rescue and conservation work, and full-page newspaper advertisements" calling the documentary misleading.

In January 2014, former trainer Dawn Brancheau's family distanced themselves from the documentary and said "Blackfish is not Dawn's story. Dawn would not have remained a trainer at SeaWorld for 15 years if she felt that the whales were not well cared for. Trainer safety was important to Dawn, and it remains important to us as well," said a statement on a charity website dedicated to the slain trainer. Almost after a year of backlash, Southwest Airlines and SeaWorld also ended their 26 years long-standing relationship.

## ‘Blackfish’ Effect on Animal Parks

Gabriela Cowperthwaite’s ‘Blackfish’ has opened up debate on the captivity of animals not only in SeaWorld but also in other animal parks and zoos. The documentary had a great impact on public’s view of animals in captivity in other water parks, conservation centers, and nonprofit zoos and aquariums. Various zoos and animals’ parks came out in their defense and called ‘Blackfish’ inaccurate. “The film is not fully accurate. Aquarium-goers feel conflicted and confused when they see sea mammals in captivity and with animal trainers. But many of the animals and fish in facilities are deemed ‘non-releasable’ by wildlife officials,” said Tim Binder who oversees animal care and the rescue rehab program at Shedd Aquarium, an indoor public aquarium in Chicago, Illinois.

## REPOSITIONING OF SEAWORLD

Repositioning of SeaWorld Two years after the release of controversial documentary 'Blackfish', SeaWorld started an aggressive long-term rebranding. The marine park began to roll out "multifaceted marketing campaign to shift public focus from the whales it holds in captivity" to its rescue and conservation programs. Here are various campaigns launched by SeaWorld to repair its image.

### *Truth About Blackfish*

A couple of months after SeaWorld's open letter, which appeared in major newspapers, including New York and USA Today, SeaWorld started an online truth campaign and built a dedicated web page called 'Truth About Blackfish' on its website to give people their version of the story. 'Truth About Blackfish' is a critical analysis of the 'Blackfish' documentary. The campaign was launched on all social media platforms of SeaWorld to provide facts with supporting examples why 'Blackfish' documentary was one-sided.

### *SeaWorld Cares and Meet the Animals*

By the end of 2014, SeaWorld CEO Jim Atchison was replaced by an experienced theme park industry veteran, Joel Manby. The marine park, under the leadership of the new CEO, pushed marketing efforts for reputation management in full swing. In March 2015, SeaWorld launched 'SeaWorld Cares,' various television commercials and quarter-page print advertisements highlighting SeaWorld's rescue and rehabilitation program, and veterinary care.

"SeaWorld Cares' goal is to turn the parks inside out, so that guests can see all the good work we are doing with animals in terms of rescue, rehabilitation, treatment, to promote a greater appreciation of the whole mission," said SeaWorld's Senior Marketing Office Peter Frey. SeaWorld also launched the 'Meet the Animals' campaign to address the common misperceptions about killer whales at SeaWorld. "There is no better way to convey the depth of our commitment to these animals and the sophistication of our care than to hear the facts from our veterinarians, trainers, keepers, animal rescue experts, and curators," SeaWorld Entertainment, Senior Corporate Affairs, Jill Kermes.

### *Ask SeaWorld*

In March 2015, SeaWorld launched an online media campaign 'Ask SeaWorld'. The tagline 'You Ask. We Answer' invited Twitter users to post questions to their veterinarians and trainers about its killer whales.

Ask SeaWorld, a part of the SeaWorldCares website, which features videos, research, and articles on marine park's rescue and rehabilitation program, is a platform to educate the public about SeaWorld and killer whales. SeaWorld's 'Ask SeaWorld' campaign backfired when animal rights activists hijacked the Twitter hashtag #AskSeaWorld in its initial stage. Many public relations experts called the campaign a social media fail. Despite the backlash, SeaWorld through this campaign was able "to answer more than 1,000 questions and covered more than 150 new topics on its Ask SeaWorld page". "The campaign emphasizes

SeaWorld's 50-year commitment to continuous evolution while setting the record straight on false accusations by activists who oppose whales and other animals in zoological settings," said Seaworld, Vice President of Communications Fred Jacobs.

### *Blue World Project*

In 2015, SeaWorld also launched its 'Blue World Project'. The project proposed to construct larger tanks than the existing ones. The marine park claimed to build new tanks thrice the size of the existing ones, with almost 1.5 acres of surface area and 50 feet of depth.

"Blue World is the fourth expansion of our killer whale environment at the park and is a demonstration of our ongoing commitment to their health and well-being," said SeaWorld, San Diego, Zoological Operations, Vice President Mike Scarpuzzi.

The California Coastal Commission approved the proposed project on the condition that "SeaWorld will have to end forcible breeding of the killer whales and accept the new rules and regulations on the moving and selling of orcas." The new regulations meant that if the killer whales die, the SeaWorld would not be able to move orcas from other parks into their own or buy new ones. In response to the new regulations, SeaWorld claimed that the commission had no power to impose such a ban and filed a lawsuit against the Commission.

### *Ending Shamu Show*

Recently, SeaWorld announced to end its iconic 'Shamu Show' in San Diego park as early as 2016 and replace it with a more conservation-based show by 2017. The show will end in San Diego park, but will continue at their other parks located in Orlando, Florida, and San Antonio, Texas. "We are listening to our guests, evolving as a company, we are always changing... In 2017, we will launch an all new orca experience focused on the natural environment [of whales]. 2016 will be the last year of our theatrical killer whale experience in San Diego," said SeaWorld CEO Joel Manby.

## PUBLIC RESPONSE

Within a few months of the release of ‘Blackfish’, SeaWorld had to face a backlash from the general public, celebrities, and animal activists. The marine park had to deal with “declining attendance, negative headlines, celebrity criticism, and pervasive social media trolling”. Seeking to repair the brand name ‘SeaWorld’, the marine park began an aggressive crisis communication campaign. While some of the campaigns got thumbs up, there were somewhere SeaWorld had to face public’s wrath.

### General Public, Animal Activists and Celebrities on Social Media

Immediately following the screening of ‘Blackfish’ on CNN and Netflix, SeaWorld started “posting a variety of videos and press releases to inform the public what the film presented as ‘facts’ were false”. When people started talking about ‘Blackfish’, two hashtags ‘#DontGoToSeaWorld’ and ‘#ThanksButNoTanks’ started trending on social media in response to SeaWorld’s ‘Truth About Blackfish’ campaign.

The biggest campaign fail was SeaWorld’s Twitter campaign ‘#AskSeaWorld’. Many 11 people started condemning SeaWorld on Twitter for its treatment of orcas at its theme parks. “The public has spoken, and they are against animal abuse,” said PETA, Assistant Director Elisa Allen.

According to Crimson Hexagon, before the ‘#AskSeaWorld’ campaign, there were already over 3.3 million tweets written about SeaWorld and ‘Blackfish’. The hashtag ‘#AskSeaWorld’ blew up with sarcastic remarks from PETA, the general public, and celebrities. “In just 5 days of the campaign, roughly 112k tweets, including the ‘#AskSeaworld’, the most retweeted posts included hashtags #blackfish and #emptythetanks”.

Later, when SeaWorld stopped replying negative tweets, twitter users created a new hashtag ‘#Answertheq’ to get their questions answered. In respond, SeaWorld tweeted, “We are trying to answer your questions but we have a few thousand trolls and bots to wade through #askseaworld #smh”.

Many celebrities, including Miley Cyrus, Harry Styles, Ellen Page, Olivia Wilde and Aaron Paul, also came out against SeaWorld and urged their fans to never visit SeaWorld again. The ‘Blackfish’ controversy also led to celebrities canceling their shows at the marine park.

On initial response to the ‘#AskSeaWorld’ campaign, CEO Joel Manby said, “On the reputation side, early feedback on our campaign has been positive, however, we recognize that fully resolving our brand challenges in California will require sustained focus and commitment to correct misinformation”.

Despite the negative tweets and a failed campaign, the announcement of ‘Blue World Project’ and ‘End of Shamu Show’ by SeaWorld got mixed reactions on Twitter. The ‘Blue World Project’ was “backed by 60 letters along with 135,000 notes of support for the project”. Backing the project, “SeaWorld’s ‘Blue World Project’ will undoubtedly be a

welcome addition to the state and region, reaffirming California’s role as a leader in animal care and research,” said former San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders.

PETA, which has been aggressively marketing against SeaWorld, did not approve of the ‘Blue World Project’. “If SeaWorld really wants to improve its image, it should spend its money on projects such as innovative animal-free exhibits that will truly wow people and coastal sanctuaries where marine mammals can feel and experience the ocean, hear their families and perhaps one day 12 is reunited with them. It shouldn’t build a slightly bigger orca prison,” PETA, President Ingrid Newkirk.

According to Visibrain, Twitter monitoring platform for digital marketing, there were 132,312 tweets for ‘End of Shamu Show’ announcement. The announcement received mixed reactions on social media where the public stood with SeaWorld by showering support using the hashtag ‘#StandWithSeaWorld’ but was outweighed by negative posts using the hashtags ‘#emptythetanks’ and ‘#boycottseaworld,’ which were mostly used by PETA and Blue Planet Society.



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