

# A look at peta's public relations programs assignment

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Approximately thirty years ago, PETA forever changed the way that the people of the United States would look at animal welfare, and the rights of animals. Although this organization is notorious for its guerilla public relations techniques, it remains the strongest voice for animal rights in the entire world. Their use of public relations has been described in many different ways: intense, over the top, ridiculous, hilarious, militant, and genius. For this reason, one must delve deeper into PETA and its use of public relations.

One can do this by identifying PETA and its history, what PETA is currently doing in regards to public relations, looking at the strengths and weaknesses of PETA's numerous public relations campaigns, further explaining the reasoning behind PETA's use of radical PR tactics, what comparable animal rights organizations are doing, and finally looking at how PETA can improve its public relations programs. The first topic of discussion is PETA itself. The acronym " PETA" stands for People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. PETA is an international nonprofit charitable organization.

Based in Norfolk, Virginia, the organization has affiliates all across the globe, including the United Kingdom, Germany, India, the Netherlands, and the Asia-Pacific region. The organization was founded in 1980, and has remained dedicated to establishing and defending the rights of all animals (PETA, 2009. ) One of PETA's mantras, as found on their primary website, is " Animals are not ours to eat, wear, experiment on, or use for entertainment. " Throughout its thirty years of existence, PETA has made some historic steps for animal rights.

Their first major work was done in 1981, and was entitled "The Silver Spring Monkeys" case. When the case was successfully completed, PETA celebrated the United State's first criminal conviction of an animal experimenter due to the cruelty of animals (PETA, 2009. ) Other campaigns created by PETA have led to numerous reforms for animal rights. These reforms include: a permanent ban on testing cosmetics on animals, juice makers ended funding for animal testing, General Motors stopped using animals in crash tests, fast food chains improved animal welfare on farms, and many fashion companies stopped selling fur in their stores.

PETA is even responsible for the first police raid of a factory farm. PETA has had considerable success in the ways on animal rights, and this can be credited to their public relations methodology (PETA, 2009. ) PETA uses a very unique public relations methodology. They not only use militant tactics, but also try to educate, as well as communicate with people and corporations around the world. The organization would not be as successful today if it did not incorporate a variety of tactics. The first tactic that will be discussed is PETA's use of videos as shock advocacy.

Shock advocacy can be described as showing the public materials (such as photos, videos, etc. ) that are disturbing, and change the opposing corporation into an enemy. PETA uses shock advocacy by showing images of farm animals being horribly killed. The most famous of these films was entitled, "Meet Your Meat". (something) Studies have proven shock advocacy to be very effective. One study done by J. Schudder and C. Mills

tested the videos on a focus group. After the group watched " Meet Your Meat" they were all much more in favor of PETA.

Although shock advocacy does work well, it can also turn off many people in the population, due to the fact that these images can cause guilt and anger from people who enjoy meat. Another tactic that PETA is known for is their ability to reinforce their messages through popular celebrity endorsements. PETA has produced three animal rights albums that include popular musical artists such as Good Charlotte, Indigo Girls, and Howard Jones. They have also sponsored and held several benefit concerts that had titles such as " Rock Against Fur" and " Fur is a Drag. Not only are many musicians behind PETA, but so are many celebrities. Pamela Anderson, Charlize Theron, and Simon Cowell are only a few of the well-known PETA representatives. Martha Stewart, one of America's favorite daytime hostesses, even hosted an anti-fur video for the animal rights group. PETA also strives to educate the overall public on animal rights issues. The staff of PETA strives to visit students that vary from the elementary to the university level. In one year, the organization distributed information packets to every elementary school in the United States.

Traveling displays are also set up around the United States, and these cover all forms of animal abuse. Educational information can also be found on PETA's variety of websites. Not only is there [peta.org](http://peta.org), but there are also sites that go along with many of the organizations different campaigns. Some of these websites include [cowsarecool.com](http://cowsarecool.com), [FurisDead.com](http://FurisDead.com), and [Peta2.com](http://Peta2.com), which is PETA's site specifically for kids and teenagers. [Peta2.com](http://Peta2.com).

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com is one of the largest sites run by the organization because kids from the ages of 12-18 are one of their key publics. On average, Peta2. com has 350,000 visitors per day.

Another mind-boggling fact is that there are over 32 million visitors to all of PETA's different websites each year, and there are over 800,000 members on the various PETA websites. PETA also uses more humorous and sometimes even intimidating tactics to promote awareness for their cause. One humorous technique that PETA uses is fake advertising. The PR practitioners at PETA understand that most of the key publics (such as teenagers) are very suspicious of advertising. So, PETA has been known to make comical renditions of well-known ads, thus showing the corporations in a bad light.

One such ad was for McDonalds, and PETA changed the name to "McMurder." Another ad that was well done was an ad that mimicked Wendy's, but had Wendy with a bloody knife, and instead of "Old Fashioned Burgers" PETA put the words "Old Fashioned Murder" on the advertisement. (Major, 2002.) A somewhat intimidating tactic that PETA uses is their "street team." Over 98,000 activists are working at grassroots levels to generate public awareness. This group primarily consists of young adults and teens, similar to the key publics that PETA strives to connect with.

The street teams not only give out information to their key publics, but they also do on-site demonstrations. One of the most famous demonstrations was "Chicks for Chicks" where young women in yellow bikinis held up signs in front of KFC condoning the corporation's mistreatment of baby chickens.

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Another infamous demonstration was when PETA members dressed up as cows, and handed out leaflets in front of Burger King restaurants. Now that the variety of tactics PETA uses has been discussed, one must look at the strengths and weaknesses of the animal rights group (PETA, 2009). PETA's strengths from a public relations standpoint will first be discussed. One of the best tactics of PETA is their use of shock advocacy. Studies have shown that after watching the videos produced by PETA, groups have seen PETA as a credible source, and they agreed that PETA's cause was a good one. Another thing that numerous studies show is that the majority of people who watched the films also believed that factory farming was horrendous, and that the causes brought up by PETA were relevant and tht attention was necessary.

Overall, the shocking videos help PETA by making them appear credible and making their adversaries seem untrustworthy. (Schudder, 2009) Another strength shown by PETA is the overall commitment to their core message. The primary focus of PETA has always been " animals are not ours to eat, wear, experiment on, or use for entertainment," and the organization strives to maintain this mantra (PETA, 2009. ) Other non-profits sometimes lose sight of their goals, however, PETA is very strict on its commitment to animal rights, and animal welfare.

The clarity of the mission is so focused, that there is no need for large committee meetings. Furthermore, the overall conciseness of the message gives the organization the strength to take risks. This clear message also helps the public to understand entirely what PETA stands for. Also, PETA uses many clear and concise campaign messages; most being only two words in

length (Enright, 2005. ) A quote from the article PETA's PR has Claws eloquently states, " PETA talks in sounds bite and distills the message into what media can digest. This is a very useful tool, because it can help PETA's message get to a variety of audiences in a variety of ways, due to their overall clarity (Enright, 2005. ) PETA is a strong organization because it not only takes risks, but it thrives off of criticism. One must remember that the primary focus of this organization is to advance its cause, and PETA does so through generating media attention. A quote from Michael McGraw (one of PETA's spokesmen), in the article Peta's PR has Claws, discusses why this is important, " We're willing to take unpopular positions and put ourselves up for ridicule.

We're not afraid of making people uncomfortable to open a dialogue. " This brings up the fact that PETA attempts to create a two-way dialogue between themselves, and the public. Even if PETA gets bad press, the organization feels that the bad press will increase traffic on their website and that, in turn, will help to educate more people. A further advantage that PETA's public relations team has is their understanding of their key publics. The organization's target audience is teens and young adults. So, to make their message appropriate for that age group, PETA makes sure that their PR campaigns are " cool. The campaigns typically include rock concerts, new art, and trendy tee shirts as well as up to date web design. A final strength that PETA has is that it takes on corporate America with passion. Although PETA is smaller than all of the primary fast food chains, it still makes these large corporations very uncomfortable. After PETA campaigned against Wendy's, Burger King and McDonald's, all three changed their animal welfare

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policies. Although they claimed PETA had nothing to do with it, the assumption is that PETA was one of the primary causes for the change in policies.

Kentucky Fried Chicken is another company that even worked with PETA to change its policies. Although these companies will never stop consuming animals, they have maintained much better programs thanks to PETA (Allen, 2003. ) Now that the strengths of PETA have been covered, one must look at the weaknesses of the organization. First of all, PETA is known for being too boisterous. Much of society feels that PETA is somewhat obnoxious in its tactics, and thus, the organization has alienated many groups of people. Furthermore, some of the past campaigns have been seen as offensive to various audiences.

Once such campaign compared animal abuse to African Americans in the slave trade. Another failed campaign was one that compared animal slaughter to holocaust victims. The problem with these campaigns is that these human lives have been compared to animals, therefore dehumanizing them, and using them as tools for another purpose. These campaigns were also unsuccessful because they are offensive to social norms. Most of society feels that animals are under humanity, and if PETA tries to prove that animal lives are the same as human lives many people will become angered (Freeman, 2007. Another problem with PETA's public relations practice is that they are not always taken seriously. Due to the comical nature of some of their campaigns, the organization is not taken as seriously as other animal rights groups, such as the ASPCA or the Humane Society. Due to the fact that



the target age group of PETA is teens and young adults, one must consider that these individuals are not as in charge of changing governmental issues as older adults are. Additionally, many of PETA's campaigns are seen as stunts, and not as campaigns.

PETA also is not known as a very sensitive or rational organization due to many of their tactics (Freeman, 2007. ) After describing both the strengths and weaknesses of PETA's public relations program, one must look at the thought process behind many of PETA's radical tactics. Due to the fact that PETA demands drastic changes to the country's economic, political, and social systems, it has to have much more drastic ways in which it gets its message across. Activists like those associated with PETA usually either use militant and/or moderate strategies.

Militant strategies incorporate shock imagery, unreasonable demands, vitriolic rhetoric, actions that promote violence, pressure against the target enemies, harassment, and sabotage. Moderate strategies consist primarily of communication and discussion with the leaders of the corporations (Derville, 2005. ) When compared to these different styles of communication, PETA tends to use much more militant tactics to get their ideas portrayed. This is because well-established corporations will not bend as far as PETA would like. These large corporations feel that their small changes are " good enough. Although PETA has impossible standards, they get more headway in their causes, as well as more publicity, due to the fact that they do not bend with these large corporations (Allen, 2003. ) PETA gets the public involved in their militant strategies due to a few different factors. First, the public that is

involved in PETA feels a sense of personal fulfillment. When activists work with PETA, they tend to leave with a sense of fulfillment to the larger cause (Derville, 2005. ) This can be seen in the street teams that protest outside of the numerous fast food restaurants.

Another way that PETA gets the public involved in through their shock imagery. These disruptive image events make the larger animal consuming companies look like the enemy through the videos of animals being slaughtered for meat as well as their fur. Although these tactics can alienate some supporters, PETA believes that they are accomplishing their goals by making people pay attention (Schudder, 2009. ) Although militant tactics can seem overpowering, they do give energy and momentum to lagging organizations. Next, the public relations programs from other animal rights organizations will be described.

First, the RSPCA is discussed. The RSPCA uses text messaging as a cheap means of getting in touch with the public (RSPCA Campaign, 2005. ) Similarly to PETA, they believe that grass roots networking is important to animal rights organizations. Also, the RSPCA takes into account more of the political aspects of animal welfare, such as laws and bills being passed protecting animal rights. These laws, although much quieter than PETA's protests, can force farmers and corporations to take better care of their animals (Williams, 2005. The Human Society of the USA is another large animal rights organization. They are known for being clean, unbiased and mainstream, however in recent times, they have become more aggressive in their tactics. Their main form of PR work is in the form of twenty to twenty five press

releases each week. They have the most members out of all the groups, as well as one of the largest budgets. They are known for their lasting, good impression (Ward, 2004. ) The final animal rights organization that will be discussed is Human USA.

Human USA uses both politics as well as public relations to get their messages across. This organization is known for financing political candidates that support their causes, as well as campaign for certain laws and bills to be passed. They are firmly against the militant tactics of PETA, however, it takes a long time for any action from Humane USA to be seen in the form of laws and bills (Southwick, 2000. ) PETA can utilize many different tactics to improve both the quality of its image as well as its PR campaigns as a whole. First of all, PETA must try to maintain equity and social responsibility.

The organization can do this by having more respect for their audience, and taking their values and social norms into perspective. This, in turn, would help them to gain the respect of more audiences. If PETA wants to have a larger audience, it must become more sensitive and serious. Freeman makes a good point when she says that PETA needs “ practical ethical guidance for using persuasive communications in ways that are respectful, foster unity, and retain ethos- realizing it is hard to show sincere respect for your audience's social values when you seek to change them. Also, many of PETA's campaigns for less meat consumption could be more effective if they promoted the health benefits, rather the changes in moral beliefs. A variety of age groups should be researched so that PETA can have dialogues with

numerous publics. Similarly to Human USA, if PETA financed candidates who believed in similar ideas, then perhaps laws could be passed to help their overall cause. PETA is a very complex non-profit organization. It has forced the world to look straight into the uncomfortable topic of animal cruelty, and it has no regrets or remorse.

Although PETA is one of the largest animal rights activist organizations in the world, it has many improvements that need to be done in its public relations programs, such as maintaining a cleaner image, and making their battle a more political one. PETA has been the cause of many great steps forward in animal rights, and this is primarily due to their public relations programs. Through the grass root techniques, celebrity endorsement, and their shock advocacy, PETA has forever changed the way America views animal rights.