

# Good example of essay on corporate branding after co- opting dissent

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After having read “ Co-opting Dissent,” and absorbing its image of corporate cultures increasingly trying to distance themselves from the monolithic picture of Big Business by seemingly friendly and down-to-earth, I thought it interesting to explore the specific relationships that consumers have with large corporations, and the hypocrisy that can often come from the unethical behavior corporations engage in. One of the largest and most pernicious perpetrators of this level of contradictory behavior is retail giant Wal-Mart, which pays workers incredibly low wages and destroys small businesses in suburban and rural areas, while also claiming to be the friends of their consumers by offering low prices.

Wal-Mart itself is a multi-billion dollar business, which hires almost 1 million workers throughout the United States (Olsson, 2003). Their marketing campaign heavily features the classic ‘ smiley face’ logo, enticing consumers to engage in a friendly rapport with the company as a brand. The slogan “ Always Low Prices” acts as a balm to their relationship with the consumer, promising affordable goods if they shop there. The origin story of Wal-Mart as being family-founded and family-run (the children of original founder Sam Walton still run the company) helps to craft a narrative that Wal-Mart is just a big family business (Olsson, 2003). All of this contributes to a company that, on the surface, appears to have the consumer’s best interests at heart. However, the cost of low prices is a large one, as Wal-Mart’s success continues to give it more and more influence over the American economy on a national scale. Lower and middle-class Americans look to it as the only option to get the needed goods required for food, shelter, basic amenities and more – the entry of a Wal-Mart into a small town is usually heralded by

the closing down of the smaller businesses who cannot compete with their low prices and reduced overhead. While Wal-Mart offers low prices and convenience by having a one-stop shop for nearly everything you need to buy to survive in America, this also cuts out the utility of those small businesses who perform more specialized tasks; their boutique appeal is undercut by sheer practicality and affordability from Wal-Mart, and those businesses go under.

Another element of ethically dubious behavior from this ostensibly friendly retail chain is the poor treatment of its workers. Wal-Mart frequently refuses to grant overtime to its workers, and pays them minimum wage with next to no chance to achieve advancement at the company. Wal-Mart workers, on average, make under \$18, 000 a year, meaning they are under the poverty line unless they have the free time and opportunity to take a second job (Olsson, 2003). Health benefits and other types of coverage are granted to but a few, and even then a substantial portion of their paycheck is allotted to said benefits – making them essentially indentured servants of Wal-Mart. Other misconduct on the part of management contributes to the overall oppressive corporate atmosphere, including supervisors deleting employee hours from timecards to lessen the burden on payroll (Olsson, 2003).

The long hours and grueling, warehouse-level work leave Wal-Mart employees with little hope for a satisfying, well-paying job; however, those jobs are taken because they are the only ones available after Wal-Mart's insertion into a small town area. Because Wal-Mart as a company is so large, they will always look for unskilled and inexperienced workers to give low pay to in exchange for the opportunity at a job (Olsson, 2003). Wal-Mart

experiences high worker turnaround, which allows them to continue to keep paying workers minimum wage. Furthermore, Wal-Mart's huge profit margins (\$6.6 billion in 2002) do not justify the poor treatment of their workers, not to mention their low pay (Olsson, 2003).

Attempts to rectify these injustices through unionizing are soundly crushed by Wal-Mart, lending further evidence that their corporate culture is toxic and undeserving of their attempts to befriend their customers. "Union avoidance programs" are solicited by consultants, hired by Wal-Mart specifically to find ways to formulate policies that will discourage unionizing however possible (Olsson, 2003). Other attempts at forming unions have resulted in employees being fired and entire branches shut down, showing Wal-Mart's dedication to profit over the welfare of its workers (Olsson, 2003).

In order to truly earn that 'friendly smile' and family-oriented branding Wal-Mart employs, the company would have to separate itself from the unethical practices it engages in. Klein (2001) is correct in that friendly, pandering corporate slogans and forced 'friendships' with company employees are somewhat offensive and uncomfortable, especially when corporations like Wal-Mart do the things they do. With every union busted, every small business crushed and every worker forced to work minimum wage with no hope of advancement or a raise, the company becomes increasingly unlikely to convince a consumer that they have their best interests in mind. When these kinds of large corporations are able to get away with effectively destroying communities, it becomes more difficult to accept the idea that it is trying to be your friend.

## **References**

Klein, N. (2001). Co-opting Dissent. In Reader's Choice (5th ed.), Pp. 162-165.

Olsson, L, (Mar 2003). Up Against Wal-Mart. Mother Jones. Retrieved from <http://motherjones.com/politics/2003/03/against-wal-mart>.