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Examining the Case of DICK's Sporting Goods: Realignment of Stakeholders through Corporate Social Advocacy

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Abstract

This study examined corporate social advocacy and political activism through the case of DICK's Sporting Goods and the company's recent stance on gun control reform. Themes related to stakeholders, corporate values, and activism versus advocacy were explored through an interview with DICK's President, documentation including an interview with DICK's CEO and statements from the company, and a social media content analysis of 3,000 public tweets to DICK's in the wake of the announcement. Findings revealed that DICK's actions extended beyond corporate social advocacy into corporate political activism, partly driven by secondary stakeholders. This action created an opportunity for DICK's to redefine and realign stakeholders while making corporate values clearer to these stakeholder groups.

Introduction

Though corporations have long been involved in politics through direct and indirect lobbying, campaign financing, and support for groups advocating particular policies or interests (Sethi, 1975), much of this activity has historically been hidden from the public. The recent rise in social media, however, has made the role of business in politics increasingly visible (Edman, 2010; Gaines-Ross, 2017). In 2017, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg took a public stance against U.S. President Trump's first executive order limiting immigration to the United States, writing on his Facebook page, "We should also keep our doors open to refugees and those who need help.

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That's who we are" (as cited in Wong, 2017, para. 2). Several months later, Merck CEO Ken Frazier resigned from the president's Manufacturing Jobs Initiative when Trump responded to the tragedy in Charlottesville, VA, when protests by white nationalists turned violent, by denouncing "hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides, on many sides" (as cited in Johnson & Wagner, 2017, para. 10). Frazier commented publicly via the Merck twitter page, "America's leaders must honor our fundamental values by clearly rejecting expressions of hatred, bigotry and group supremacy, which run counter to the American ideal that all people are created equal" (as cited in Gaines-Ross, 2017, para. 8).

With social media serving as a platform for corporations to engage publicly on social issues, consumer expectations for Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and involvement in social concerns have continued to grow. According to a 2015 global survey on CSR, 66% of consumers are willing to pay more for sustainable brands, compared with 55% in 2014 and 50% in 2013 (Nielsen, 2015). Meanwhile, a study from APCO Worldwide found 90% of consumers expect brands to be "involved in taking on society's most pressing concerns" (APCO, 2018, p. 3). As companies continue to face rising pressures to comment on divisive political issues, exploring when and why corporations engage with stakeholders on political issues is important to consider, as is understanding how consumers react to these activities.

Using a case study investigation into DICK's Sporting Goods decision to stop selling assault-style rifles and only sell firearms to those over 21 following the February 14, 2018, shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, FL, this study explores the potential for corporations to leverage their influence to encourage political activism and policy change. By looking at both the decision-making process that led to the decision, as well as public response via the company's social media, this study sheds light on the evolution of Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) in today's political and social media climates. As U.S. politics become further polarized, businesses are increasingly being called upon by consumers to take a stance on important politically charged social and environmental issues (Feroohar, 2016; Weber Shandwick, 2017), and emerging research suggests that not taking a stance on controversial political issues can have potentially negative consequences for some companies (Korschun, 2017).

Literature review

Corporate social responsibility and issues management

Corporate issue advocacy has existed, in some form or another, since the initiation of corporate institutional advertising in the early 1900s (Sethi, 1977). In 1908, for example, American Telegraph & Telephone Company (AT&T) engaged in issue advertising promoting the need for a regulated, monopolistic national telephone network (Cutler & Muehling, 1989) and urging cooperation and understanding among consumers (Sethi, 1977). Another example from the early

1900s involved efforts by German textile interests to recover property seized during World War I. Despite earlier instances of issue advertising, the political and social changes of the late 1960s and early 1970s are often credited with the rise of corporate issue advocacy (Sethi, 1977). As public and media criticism regarding a variety of political, environmental, and social issues gained a foothold in the United States, businesses and industries began looking for ways to defend themselves against perceived news bias (Heath & Nelson, 1986). Between 1975 and 1977, Sethi (1979) estimated that approximately 30 to 40% of corporate institutional advertising was devoted to controversial social issues dealing with aspects of national public policy.

In recent years, corporate advocacy regarding social issues has been discussed in academic literature as a subset of CSR. CSR focuses on the relationship between business and society (Snider, Hill, & Martin, 2003) and involves organizational operations that connect back to greater societal economic, ethical, legal, or philanthropic concerns (Carroll, 1991; Kim & Reber, 2008). CSR initiatives also are designed to portray a company as responsive to the needs and concerns of society (Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006). A significant body of CSR literature emphasizes that companies that do good are expected to do well (Simpson & Kohers, 2002); thus, financial performance has served as a guiding evaluative criterion for the effectiveness of CSR in scholarship and practice for decades (Dodd & Supa, 2014).

For corporations to be viewed as “good corporate citizens,” however, they must do “what is expected morally and ethically” (Carroll, 1991, p. 41), and managing consumer expectations regarding social issues has become increasingly challenging as public opinion on a host of social issues has become increasingly polarized. Stakeholder perceptions regarding corporate “engagement in and stances on social-political issues may differ among stakeholder groups and across individuals, ultimately impacting organizational goals” (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 3). Organizations therefore must decide when, where, and how to engage with stakeholders on evolving standards of what is deemed acceptable or socially responsible. Strategic issues management—a combination of “organizational functions and responsive culture that blends strategic business planning, issue monitoring, best-practice standards of corporate responsibility, and dialogic communication needed to foster a supportive climate between each organization and those people who can affect its success and who are affected by its operations” (Heath & Palenchar, 2009, pp. 8-9)—is often needed to manage stakeholder expectations and beliefs about the ways an organization *should* behave.

Corporate social advocacy and political activism

When used as a CSR strategy, CSA serves as a method for businesses to engage with publics on significant issues. Dodd and Supa (2014), however, suggest that CSA warrants unique analysis separate from CSR and issues management literature for several reasons, including the fact that 1) in many cases, the social or political issues addressed by the corporation are separate from issues that have direct relevance to the company, and 2) engagement by the company with the issue is controversial and has the potential to isolate some stakeholders while attracting activist

groups. Whereas CSR strategy is designed to address social issues that are likely to generate uniformly positive responses from consumers, usually through supporting a cause or taking a non-confrontational stance on an issue that does not involve controversy, CSA occurs when a company comments publicly on divisive political topics (Dodd & Supa, 2014).

Additionally, although CSR initiatives involve planned efforts that contribute both to the company's business objectives as well as social responsibilities of a brand (Dodd & Supa, 2014), CSA is often reactive and sometimes unrelated to the company's core business obligations (Dodd & Supa, 2015). Fast-food restaurant Chick-Fil-A's creation of the "Chick-Fil-A Foundation," which provides scholarships for underprivileged youth, would reflect the company's CSR; whereas, Chick-Fil-A CEO Dan Cathy's anti-gay marriage statements in response to public discussions around the legalization of same-sex marriage involved CSA (O'Connor, 2014). On the other side of the issue, Starbucks' advocacy on same-sex marriage lacks an obvious connection to the company and has the potential to both unite and divide stakeholder groups and thus is an example of CSA; these activities are qualitatively different than Starbucks' CSR regarding forest conservation, given forest conservation's relevance to Starbucks' business operations (Dodd & Supa, 2014).

Recently, several scholars have made even more nuanced distinctions between CSA and corporate political activism (CPA) (Korschun, Aggarwal, Rafieian, & Swain, 2016; Clemensen, 2017). Within marketing literature, Korschun et al. (2016), for example, suggested that CPA extends beyond advocacy that supports a cause or issue (e.g., public safety) into *how* social issues should be addressed in the political sphere (e.g., through gun control measures). According to Clemensen (2017), CSA has a more positive connotation than political activism; the company is *supporting* a cause, which aligns with the definition of the word advocacy. However, CPA takes a more negative approach, typically speaking out *against* or in response to political issues that tend to be more controversial, such as making a negative statement in response to legislation passed on controversial issues like gun control, same-sex marriage, or abortion. As the terms CSA and CPA seem to be used interchangeably in popular media to refer to the same corporate action, research relevant to both CSA and CPA is presented in the following section. This paper, however, refers to DICK's Sporting Goods' actions regarding gun control as CSA given its predominance within the public relations literature.

Public response to corporate social advocacy

Applying the theory of planned behavior, Dodd and Supa (2014) explored how the congruence or incongruence of consumer attitudes toward social-political issues with organizational stances affected differences in consumers' purchase intentions. The theory of planned behavior assumes that people usually behave in a sensible manner based on available information; the theory suggests that "a person's intention to perform (or not to perform) a behavior is the most important immediate determinant of that action" (Ajzen, 2005, p. 117). Using an experimental method with a national sample of participants, the researchers found that for the issues of same-

sex marriage, health care reform, and emergency contraception, consumer alignment with a corporate stance resulted in greater intentions to purchase. The authors suggested that the financial impact has the potential to be either positive or negative, depending on the stakeholder group, and perhaps in some contexts, “the impact offsets itself leaving the ability to advocate ‘freely’” (Dodd & Supa, 2014, p. 14). Although the study focused on the impact of CSA on a company's bottom line, the researchers suggested that future research explore beyond direct financial measures, and specifically called for case study research to examine the ways various stakeholders are impacted by organizational stances.

Meanwhile, research by Korschun et al. (2016) found that *not* taking a stand in regard to a social issue may be more problematic for some companies than taking a stand with which consumers disagree. In a field experiment and two controlled experiments, Korschun et al. (2016) found that abstention (versus taking a stand) resulted in lower purchase intentions for companies that were perceived to be guided by values. To elaborate, consistent with expectations and previous research (e.g., Dodd & Supa, 2014), the study found that corporate political stance did affect consumer purchase in the way that one would expect for some companies (i.e., support for the issue resulted in increased purchase intentions); however, the findings challenged “the implicit notion in marketing literature that all other things being equal, consumers do not purchase from companies with which they disagree on salient beliefs” (p. 9).

For companies considered to be values-oriented, it was, in fact, seen as more important for them take a stand “even when such a stand runs counter to the beliefs of customers” (p. 6). The authors defined values-oriented companies as companies that presented themselves as making decisions and acting based on stated values (e.g., Johnson & Johnson, L.L. Bean, Starbucks, and Whole Foods); whereas, results-oriented companies are driven by the goal of achieving marketing objectives. ExxonMobil, which states in its “guiding principles” that the company continuously achieves “superior financial and operating results while simultaneously adhering to high ethical standards” (ExxonMobil, 2018, para. 1), was referenced as an example of a results-oriented company. The authors concluded that public response to CPA was mediated by perceived corporate hypocrisy relative to what type of company consumers perceived them to be—values-oriented or results-oriented (Korschun et al., 2016). This research challenged the traditional wisdom “that companies should eschew political stands because such stands might alienate consumers. Instead, the evidence presented suggested that customers do not always reject political stands, even when such stands are in opposition to their personal views” (Korschun et al., 2016, p. 6). Consumers may be quite tolerant of diverse viewpoints, as long as they are not seen as hypocritical to who they say they are as a company.

Stakeholder theory and CSA

Stakeholder theory offers an important framework for examining the motivating factors for CSA, as well as exploring how stakeholder groups may respond to corporate involvement with contentious political issues. Although many business ethicists argue that corporations have an

ethical obligation beyond their own financial performance to operate in the interest of society, or at the least, in the interest of stakeholders (Reiter, 2016), this argument is a significant alteration from historical theories of business ethics that asserted that the primary role of corporations is to maximize return on investment to shareholders (Friedman, 1970). According to Freeman (1984), however, shareholders represent only one of a company's many stakeholders. Stakeholder theory suggests that businesses also should consider the interests and concerns of groups affected by the business (i.e., stakeholders). These individuals can affect or are "affected by the actions, decisions, policies, practices or goals of the organization" (Carroll & Bucholtz, 2014, p. 66). Reiter (2016) states that companies operating according to stakeholder theory are "no longer capitalists acting in their own self-interest to accumulate wealth, but rather acting in the interest of society for a social cause, to create value" (p. 358). These businesses pursue value creation not through the pursuit of corporate wealth alone, but rather through developing and advancing stakeholder relationships.

In practice, stakeholder theory involves the classification of stakeholders into useful categories that provide some understanding of how stakeholder groups influence business operations (Rowley, 1997). Freeman (1984) suggests that a company's success lies in acknowledging stakeholder concerns and identifying how we create value for stakeholder groups, including employees, governmental agencies, environmental groups, vendors, etc. Given the potential divisiveness of CSA, corporations acting according to stakeholder theory that choose to comment publicly on polarizing issues face the challenge of prioritizing stakeholder groups and addressing concerns from multiple groups, including those with whom the CSA may be consistent as well as those with whom the CSA may be inconsistent.

The case study: DICK's Sporting Goods

On February 28, 2018, following the Parkland shooting, DICK's Sporting Goods announced its decision to stop selling assault-style weapons and to raise the minimum age for gun sales to 21. The company announced it also would not sell accessories for use with AR-15 rifle and other similar weapons, including high-capacity magazines that permit a shooter to fire more rounds than traditional weapons without reloading (Isidore, 2018). DICK's initially decided to stop selling military-style semi-automatic weapons in 2012 following the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, CT, though the weapons were still available at a number of the company's Field and Stream stores. Although the gun used by the shooter in Parkland was not bought at DICK's Sporting Goods, the company did acknowledge that the shooter had purchased another gun from its stores. A week after the shooting, DICK's Chairman and CEO Edward Stack explained, "We don't want to be a part of this story any longer" (CNN Money, 2018, 2:36) and pulled all of those weapons from its stores.

Looking beyond the new corporate policies for its own stores, DICK's Sporting Goods' actions and public statements represent CSA in that the company moves beyond support for a

social issue into calls for how the issue should be addressed in the political sphere. Specifically, Stack commented that he hoped the conversation would extend beyond social media into the political realm, and he called on elected officials to pass what the company called “common sense” gun reforms, including banning assault-style weapons and bump stocks, raising the minimum gun-buying age to 21, and conducting more extensive background checks that include past interactions with law enforcement and mental-health information (as cited in Creswell & Corkery, 2018, para. 19).

The rise in CSA we increasingly have witnessed by many corporations reflects a unique and emerging trend, and as such, deserves increased exploration regarding its potential impact on public discourse and political issues. The case of DICK's Sporting Goods serves as an ideal case study for exploring CSA through the lens of stakeholder theory, and this research serves as a direct response to calls pointing to the need for such inquiry. For example, Korschun et al. (2016) suggested CSR literature is lacking in regard to consumer reactions to corporate political activism. Gaither, Austin, and Schulz (2018) also highlighted the need for case study research exploring the social impacts of corporate social change initiatives that extend beyond CSR's current focus on consumer purchasing patterns. If a corporation “can do good only to help itself do well, there is a profound limit on just how much good it can do” (Bakan, 2004, p. 50).

Method

According to Yin (2014), case studies use a theoretical framework with the advantage of exploring multiple sources of evidence, allowing for in-depth insight and a look at the phenomenon as a whole, rather than single elements of stakeholder communication. This study uses a case study methodology triangulating multiple data points, including company-issued news releases, statements from chief executives, and a social media content analysis of public response to DICK's Sporting Goods CSA social media messages. These sources then were analyzed through the lens of CSA and stakeholder theory, providing unique insight into both bodies of literature.

Analysis of texts

Sources of texts

Multiple texts were investigated for the case study, including an in-depth interview conducted by the researchers with DICK's Sporting Goods President Lauren Hobart, a video interview posted online with Stack (CNN Money, 2018), an opinion editorial by Stack (2018) appearing in *The Washington Post*, and a company-issued media statement announcing the decision and change in policy (DICK's Sporting Goods, 2018). The in-depth interview with DICK's president was conducted on March 28, 2018, via phone and was audio-recorded and fully transcribed. Informed

consent was obtained through email prior to the interview. The interview guide included questions regarding the rationale for the decision, how the decision aligned with corporate values, who DICK's considered its primary stakeholders, and how the move aligned with the perceived values of stakeholders. Questions also explored if—and how—the company hoped the move would serve as an inspiration to others. This research also used publicly available online texts, including a recorded interview with Stack, as well as the company-issued media statement from February 28, 2018 (DICK's Sporting Goods, 2018).

Data analysis

Transcripts from these texts were explored through the theoretical lens of CSA and stakeholder theory. Texts were analyzed using a constant comparative approach to allow for the emergence of additional themes that contributed to overall understanding and exploration (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Potter, 1996; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A constant comparative approach from a grounded theory perspective allowed data collection and analysis to be done fluidly and jointly, building research themes as the data collection progressed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the constant comparative method, incidents in the data—such as significant events, actions, or interactions—are compared against prior incidents and later compared to new incidents within the same category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Themes were analyzed line-by-line through open coding of interview transcripts and documents based on expectations from the theoretical constructs, and emergent themes were coded separately using open, in-vivo coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Social media content analysis

The study also used a content analysis exploring public response to DICK's Sporting Goods CSA social media messages. With the growth of social media networks, stakeholders are no longer passive receivers of corporate information but now have the opportunity to engage with and evaluate content for other users to see (Dellarocas, 2003). By engaging with stakeholders in social media about political issues, companies open themselves up to a host of potential criticisms about motivations and legitimacy (Etter, 2013).

Sample

To analyze public response to DICK's CSA, 10,000 tweets sent to @DICKS from February 28 to March 4, 2018, were sampled using MAXQDA Software. This time period reflected the day the announcement was made and five days out. Tweets were manually removed if they did not pertain to DICK's announcement. Identical tweets (excluding retweets) also were manually removed to avoid the inclusion of bots in the sample, as were tweets where the user profile

included gibberish or nonsensical characters or tweets from accounts with unrealistic numbers of tweets compared to the time the twitter profile had been in use.

An exploratory coding process identified emergent categories for coding, based on an exploratory qualitative analysis and a visualization of word frequencies in the MAXQDA software represented in the tweets. Based on these emergent categories, keywords related to these identified themes were auto-coded in the MAXQDA software, and all tweets containing these keywords were retrieved for manual analysis. A final sample of 3,000 tweets containing these themes was coded.

Coding categories

The final protocol for analysis was based on categories deemed important from the qualitative coding and from the texts analyzed, including themes relating to stakeholder theory and the valence of the public response. The coding categories included mentions of *action-oriented behaviors* (i.e., boycotting, shopping—both positive and negative, loss of customers, lawsuits, and bankruptcy), mentions of *attitudes* (i.e., negative attitudes, gratitude/positive attitudes), mentions of DICK's *values, principles, or traits* (i.e., principles/ethics, bravery/courage, taking action/standing up for others, leadership, sensibility), mentions of *stakeholder groups* (i.e., customers, youth/students, parents, society/community, gun owners, school personnel/teachers), and other (i.e., 2nd amendment of the U.S. Constitution , U.S. National Rifle Association (NRA)).

Intercoder reliability

The sample of tweets was manually coded by three coders who were trained on the coding protocol. Coders examined 10% of the initial sample to achieve intercoder reliability for the coding. Intercoder reliability was calculated using Krippendorff's Alpha, at an average alpha coefficient of .88 for the differing categories, with the lowest alpha coefficient at .79, which is deemed acceptable for exploratory research (Krippendorff, 2004a, 2004b). Once interrater reliability was achieved, the three coders each independently coded 1,000 tweets of the 3,000.

Findings

Statements from DICK's sporting goods

Change in policy drive by secondary stakeholders

In the in-depth interview, Hobart identified the company's primary stakeholders to be its shareholders, employees, and customers, as well as the communities it serves. According to multiple sources of data, however, the company's recent change in policies regarding gun sales

was prompted not by primary stakeholders, but by secondary stakeholders, or individuals without a direct influence on the company. The company-issued media statement opened with a reference to the “tragic events” in Parkland and highlighted the “respect and admiration for the students organizing and making their voices heard regarding gun violence in schools and elsewhere across the country” (DICK's Sporting Goods, 2018, para. 3). Likewise, although the company had implemented aspects of these new policies following the Sandy Hook shooting, in his online statements, Stack specifically pointed to youth in Parkland as the driving force for the company's most recent changes: “When these kids at Parkland, the survivors at Parkland, were brave enough to stand up and be counted, we felt we needed to be brave enough and stand up and take a stand also” (CNN Money, 2018, 2:00).

These sentiments were reiterated in the interview with Hobart, who also explained the company's rationale for the public nature of its stance on gun control versus the alternative option of changing corporate policy without commenting publicly on the Parkland events or the rationale for the changes:

As the kids in Parkland got more and more vocal and were being so brave, we just felt like we were letting them down if we took a quiet action. . . Once we decided what we wanted to do, we felt a great sense of urgency, both to support the kids and also to get out and sort of lead this debate.

Realignment of stakeholders

Although customers and employees were both identified as primary stakeholders, DICK's president acknowledged that the company expected a wide range of responses from individuals within these groups, stating, “We weren't expecting it to be a well-received decision by many of our customers.” Given that the move involved stopping sales to a certain age group, she explained the company “did the action knowing there would be a negative sales impact” and with the expectation for “polarized reactions.” And although Hobart acknowledged a sharp divide in responses, her comments suggested the overall response seemed to be tilted favorably. She explained that the company has “gotten support from people we didn't expect to get support from, and then there's a group of people who will never shop with us again, and they're making that clear.”

Looking beyond sales and customers, the president acknowledged the new policies were also not well-received by some employees. According to Hobart:

With the employee stakeholders, there are people at our Field and Stream stores who work in the hunting department who quit based on their complete disagreement with our point of view on this, and we have not had any issue with them doing that. They have been respectful; it's sort of a mutual parting of the ways, but there have been people who have voted by resigning.

Despite the negative reaction among some employees, Hobart said she felt as if the employee response has been primarily positive. Although the company had concerns it would “be heading into a crisis,” Hobart explained the “support has been overwhelming.” As she said:

“The employees are so proud, and it’s just been an incredibly positive thing for the vast majority of employees who agree. It was a shock. . . We really prepared for the worst, so it’s been really surprising.”

Prioritizing children

Throughout texts, there was significant emphasis on children—both the youth from Parkland and children in general. Regarding the youth from Parkland, the media statement referred to the “students organizing and making their voices heard” and underscored that, “We [DICK’s] have heard you” (DICK’s Sporting Goods, 2018, para. 4). In Stack’s (2018, para. 5) editorial, he wrote:

The survivors of the Parkland, Fla., massacre—and the thousands of students who made their feelings known for 17 minutes last week—are standing up and shouting ‘enough is enough’ and ‘never again’. . . In the weeks since we at DICK’s Sporting Goods announced plans to stop selling assault-style rifles, plans to only sell firearms to those over 21 and other new policies, we have been striving to keep the conversation going. . . We have spoken with strong-willed advocacy groups and visited with the families in Parkland.

Repeatedly throughout the texts, children in general were highlighted as the driving force for the changes. Stack wrote in *The Washington Post*, “[The gun laws in this country] are not focused on keeping all of us safe—especially our children” (2018, para. 3). Likewise, the company’s initial media statement explained, “We believe this country’s most precious gift is our children. They are our future. We must keep them safe” (DICK’s Sporting Goods, 2018, para. 13). According to Hobart, the changes reflected the fact that “we [DICK’s] are all about kids.”

An opportunity to reiterate corporate values

An analysis of the texts overwhelmingly suggests that the changes in corporate policies, coupled with the public comments on the driving rationale for the changes, served as an opportunity to reiterate the corporation’s key values. According to Hobart:

The higher purpose that we talk about frequently and we have been talking about for years is what we call “sports matter” and the fact that we believe sports really do make people’s lives better. . . While we’ve never come out like this and made a statement, especially with a topic this politically charged, it actually felt very similar to our values in that we support communities and we are all about kids. These kids, and by kids, I mean high schoolers, going out and making such a statement, and us feeling like we could contribute to a safer society and make a difference very much fits with the values of our company.

As a firearms vendor, the company also used this opportunity to reiterate its values regarding the 2nd Amendment, while highlighting the “loopholes and inconsistencies in our

firearms laws” (Stack, 2018, para. 10). In announcing the changes in the media statement, DICK's commented, “We recognize and support the Second Amendment, and we recognize and appreciate the vast majority of gun owners in this country are responsible, law-abiding citizens” (DICK's Sporting Goods, 2018, para. 5). Likewise, in his opinion article in the *Washington Post*, Stack (2018, para. 2) simultaneously tried to demonstrate an understanding of the potential concerns of gun owners while pointing to the need for some changes in gun policy:

As a gun owner, I support the Second Amendment and understand why, for many, the right to bear arms is as American as baseball and apple pie. But I also agree with what Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia wrote in his majority opinion in 2008's landmark Heller case: “Like most rights, the right secured by the Second Amendment is not unlimited. It is “not a right to keep and carry any weapon whatsoever in any manner whatsoever and for whatever purpose.” (as cited in Stack, 2018, para. 2)

Extending beyond advocacy into activism

The changes by DICK's were clearly a move that the company hoped would spur change beyond the company's individual policies. In the initial media statement, the company expressed its “hope” that others would join the efforts “to let our kids know that their pleas are being taken seriously” (DICK's Sporting Goods, 2018, para. 11). It is interesting to note that although the company's public statements primarily direct its activism at lawmakers, the company repeatedly said it hoped to “bring people into the conversation” (as cited in Creswell & Corkery, 2018, para. 14), suggesting, albeit subtly, that other businesses should consider addressing this issue as well. DICK's president, however, explained that “at one point in some of our statements we had a real call to other businesses to join us. We made it sort of an overt call in one of our drafts, and then we said that's not our job here,” noting that “everyone has to do what's right for their values and their companies.”

The calls for lawmakers to address the issue, however, were pointed, direct, and framed as the right thing to do (CNN Money, 2018). In his online interview, Stack commented:

I suspect that many of our legislators know what's right. It's kind of a cliché, but leaders lead. They make difficult decisions. They make decisions that may not be right for themselves or their career or how long they're doing a particular job, but they know what the right thing to do is. And I hope that our leaders in Washington will stand up and do what they know is really right and help fix this problem. (Stack, 2018, 0:41)

Stack went on to comment on legislation being considered as a good first step, but emphasized that there's a long way to go (Stack, 2018). In talking about the Stop School Violence Act, Stack said the following:

It [the Act] says nothing about assault style rifles, it says nothing around background checks, it deals nothing with high capacity magazines, age. It's a good first step, and I hope it passes, but there's a lot more to do. . . Remember what Judge Scalia said, who might be considered the most conservative judge that we've had on the Supreme Court in a long time. He said, “The right to bear arms is not unlimited. There's [*sic*] limits to the

2nd Amendment.” I hope the House and the Senate will again come together with the intent to fix the problem, [be]cause that's what they need to do. (Stack, 2018, 1:18)

In moving forward, Hobart also highlighted the need for continued focus on the issue of gun control:

Since we made the announcement, we've been out meeting with people in Congress; we've been meeting with stakeholders on both sides of the aisle, trying to keep this conversation going. . . We feel that one of our key jobs is just to keep the pressure on and keep the conversation going. So, we plan to keep meeting, and almost lobbying, for what our points of view are.

Public response to these actions via public comments on twitter

Consistent with Hobart's statements regarding public response, content analysis of public comments toward DICK's on twitter revealed that overall attitudes expressed in tweets were overwhelmingly positive. Around 70% of the tweets ($n = 2,095$) expressed gratitude or positive sentiment. Neutral (14.8%, $n = 443$) and negative attitudes (15.4%, $n = 461$) were present in fewer tweets.

Gratitude was common

The most dominant theme among the tweets expressing positive sentiments was gratitude toward DICK's policy statement. For example, one tweet mentioned, “Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. From the bottom of my heart. This shows that corporate companies like yourselves do have compassionate hearts and are not in it just for the money. Everyone needs to take a stand against gun violence.” As another stated, “@DICKS thanks for doing the right thing. Your wisdom on this will be noted. I'll be spending my money with you.”

Negative attitudes, the NRA, and the 2nd Amendment

Some of the tweets expressing negative attitudes about DICK's decision were tied to mentions of the NRA or the 2nd Amendment. For example, as a tweet stated, “As a person who respects the 2nd Amendment, I guess I will be buying my sporting goods at another retailer that is not so wishy washy.” As another said, “And I will never walk into your stores again for pushing to take away my freedom #SupportTheNRA.” However, within mentions of the NRA, 37.6% ($n = 59$) spoke negatively of the NRA and in favor of DICK's, while only 22.9% ($n = 36$) spoke positively of the NRA and negatively of DICK's. Within 2nd Amendment mentions, although most felt that DICK's actions infringed on this right (47.4%, $n = 36$), some disagreed (28.9%, $n = 22$).

Neither positive nor negative

Even though not everyone agreed with DICK's stance, some felt that it was the company's right to make these decisions and appreciated that the company was taking its own position. For example, as a tweet stated, “@DICKS and @Walmart have raised their buying age to 21 and I

say if that's how they feel about this issue good for them BUT I love this for the small mom and pop gun stores the business will be flooding in. I love how a free economy works. #shopping #CommonSenseGunLaws.”

Consumers taking action

In relation to these positive and negative attitudes, many expressed intentions to take actions, including positive and negative shopping behaviors, boycotting, following on social media, and a few mentions of lawsuits and bankruptcy. Within those posts that mentioned shopping, 65% ($n = 685$) referenced shopping in relation to a positive attitude, while 17% ($n = 177$) referenced shopping in relation to a negative attitude, and 19% in relation to a neutral attitude ($n = 196$).

Shopping and sales in relation to the action

Many of the tweets referenced shopping behavior in stores (35%, $n = 1059$), and most that did so were positive. For positive shopping mentions, individuals often posted pictures of their shopping bags, their receipts or purchases at DICK's, or the exterior of DICK's stores (See Image 1). As one individual posted, “@DICKS your commitment to the safety of Americans is a beacon of hope for all that feels nobody cares! Just updated my entire sports attire at your West Bloomfield store. THANK YOU!” Others mentioned increasing their planned purchases in the store. For example, one tweet stated, “We were planning on shopping this weekend at @DICKS for baseball cleats - we will add baseball pants and 2 new bats to our purchase instead of buying those through @amazon. Thank you @DICKS for doing the right thing. You won our business fully.”

Image 1. Tweets evidencing purchases



(Left: Purchase total on the screen at checkout after a purchase was made at DICK's; Right: Customer holding up shopping bags outside of DICK's after a purchase was made)

Although fewer posts mentioned negative shopping, around 10% of the entire sample ($n = 299$) included specific mentions of negative shopping. One example of a tweet referencing no longer shopping there stated, "You just lost a lot of business messing with our 2nd amendment rights. I know I won't be shopping there anymore." Others mentioned now shopping at competitors. For example, another tweet mentioned, "You have lost my family as long time customers. Going to Bass Pro."

Boycotting

Some posts also mentioned boycotting DICK's (6.9%, $n = 206$). One tweet that recommended boycotting DICK's stated, "Never shopped with you anyway. But I support a #BoycottDicksSportingGoods #BoycottDicks." Several others recommended boycotting the NRA. For example, one said, "@DICKS @Walmart thank you for your leadership #BoycottNRA."

Lawsuits or bankruptcy

Mentioned far less frequently were lawsuits (.5%, $n = 15$) or mentions of impending bankruptcy (1.1%, $n = 32$). A tweet that referenced lawsuits, for example, stated, "@DICKS @Walmart I hope you are getting ready for the class action lawsuits for age discrimination." One that refers to bankruptcy stated: "Lol! Sell all your stock. Hope these dicks (pun intended) go bankrupt!"

Referencing values or principles

Many of the posts expressing gratitude and positive attitudes included mentions of values and principles of the company, including showing responsibility, ethics, bravery, commonsense, integrity, and strong leadership (33.6%, $n = 1008$). For example, as a tweet stated, "My gf was killed in Vegas, this made me cry. THANK YOU! Thank you for your honesty, transparency, and integrity. Thank you for choosing life. Thank you for setting a [precedent] for other stores and sellers [to] follow. Thank you for helping to protect our kids and our families." As another stated, "You guys rock! Amazing response - practical, sensible and achievable. Corporate Social Responsibility never looked so good. Thank you for hearing and helping to protect our kids. For once I wish everyone acted like Dicks!"

Consistent with statements made by DICK's leadership, some posts mentioned DICK's "doing the right thing" or having values and principles (10.6%, $n = 319$). For example, one tweet stated, "@DICKS You've earned my loyalty! You're doing the right thing, even if it hits the bottom line hard. I'm proud to be your customer." Similarly, posts mentioned DICK's being responsible: "Thank you for being a responsible corporate citizen. Bravo!" Other posts specifically mentioned ethics. For example, one said, "Applauding your ethics, and acknowledging your courage in putting our [kids'] safety before \$\$\$\$. Know that many of us do not see the right to have AR style weapons or high capacity magazines as rights afforded by the 2nd amendment."

Others mentioned bravery, or having “guts” (4.5%, $n = 135$). As one tweet mentioned: “Your company has shown guts, heart and smarts! I used to buy sporting gear for very athletic kids and grandkids on amazon but you get all our business from now on. Lead on!” As another mentioned, “We need more brave and smart companies like @dicks THANK YOU for your common sense.”

Leadership

Values and principles also were tied into mentions of leadership (15.6%, $n = 467$). For example, as one tweet stated, “@DICKS well done on showing principled leadership around sensible gun control.” And as another stated, “@DICKS You guys are AMAZING!!! Thank you for taking a stand, and being BOLD!!! Major Major Kudos to the leadership! Sometimes, we have to set a standard, despite the seeming backlash! Way to show leadership! Awesome Awesome leadership! Thank you!!!”

Leadership also was mentioned often in reference to taking the first step, taking a lead, or setting an example for others to follow. Examples included brief mentions of leadership like the following tweet: “Thank you. This is what leadership looks like,” and praise of their leadership like this tweet: “Thank you @DICKS for common-sense suggestions. Your leadership is exemplary - hopefully Congress and states will follow.” Other tweets called on business to take action now, in response. For example, one tweet stated, “@DICKS and @Walmart made the right choice today, and I will support their businesses because of it. Your move, @FedEx. #BoycottNRA.”

Skepticism toward values or principles

Although many believed that DICK's put forth this statement out of its corporate principles or values, the decision was met with skepticism from others. For example, one tweet read, “@DICKS you literally put out an article 6 months ago about how your gun and sports [sales] weren't good enough, and now you're using a mass shooting to make money by pretending to care.” Some tweets also mentioned what they perceived to be the absence of values or principles based on DICK's decision. For example, as a tweet said, “And I will no longer shop at Dicks Sporting goods. Dicks has no business in politics and is only using the tragic shootings of children to promote themselves! People who run companies like Dicks make me want to throw-up! No morals! #clueless.”

Stakeholders

Stakeholder groups mentioned in the public tweets included customers, greater society, society's children/youth, parents, and gun owners. Other groups mentioned less frequently included school teachers and employees.

Customers

The most frequently mentioned stakeholder group was customers (12.4%, $n = 371$), and within mentions of customers, the vast majority was positive (75.7%, $n = 281$). Many of the tweets referenced DICK's gaining new customers, although some also referenced current customers shopping there more. As an example of gaining customers, one tweet said, "You just gained a new customer. I'll drive out of my way to give you my business. Thank you!" As another tweet referenced, "You have just earned a new loyal customer. I will be shopping in your store starting this weekend. Kudos!" As an example of maintaining current customers, one tweet said, "With multiple kids in sports, you already get plenty of my money. I'm happy to give you more!"

Although far fewer than the positive mentions, some posts were negative and expressed that DICK's would be losing its current customer base (15.9%, $n = 59$). For example, one tweet read, "You MUST realize you just thoroughly pissed off a majority of your customer base all for political correctness. So stupid! I've spent thousands at Dicks from shotguns to whole gyms to countless BBall shoes. You will not get one more dime! EVER! @NRA #BoycottDicks #NRA4Life." As another tweet mentioned, "You just pissed off most of your customer base to appease people who would never shop your store anyway."

Children, youth, and students

Consistent with statements by DICK's leadership, a lot of the social media discussion revolved around increasing public safety for children and students (8.5%, $n = 255$), and some posters mentioned the actions taken by the Parkland youth. For example, a tweet stated, "Thank you, @DICKS - your advocacy on behalf of children and public safety is appreciated. You have my business." As another stated, "Thank you, @DICKS. It takes courage to stand up and be set apart, like the students from Parkland have done. I applaud them and I support businesses that believe in protecting our children."

Society/community

Some of the posts mentioned DICK's actions being for all citizens, for society, for humans, or for the greater public (4.5%, $n = 135$). For example, as a tweet mentioned, "Thanks for a powerful stand in a direction that can make a positive impact for the greater good of all of us!" As another mentioned, "You as a company have my deepest appreciation and respect for your initiative. May this be another huge step toward Peace among USA citizens."

Parents

A smaller group of stakeholders also identified themselves in their posts as parents (2.7%, $n = 81$), although it might be assumed that many more were parents but did not explicitly mention this in their tweets. As an example of a mention of being a parent, a post stated, "As a mother, a citizen, and a taxpayer, thank you for taking a sensible stand on the gun violence epidemic." As another mentioned, "As a scared mom: Thank you for your leadership & courage!"

Other stakeholder groups

Gun owners were one affected group that was mentioned less frequently (1.1%, $n = 32$). When gun owners were mentioned, the conversation actually skewed toward the positive with support for DICK's decision (Positive: 63%, $n = 20$). For example, a gun owner spoke positively about the action: "@DICKS excellent move by CEO Edward Stack. I am a gun owner and fully support your decision implemented today. I encourage other big names to do the same. I will reward your move by my patronage. The people run this great country not the NRA." As another mentioned, "@DICKS This rural American gun owner thanks you for your brave and sensible stance. I won't forget this important step. You are now my provider of choice."

Another stakeholder group that was not explicitly coded for and was not mentioned frequently was employees. For example, one tweet mentioned: "@DICKS Former employee, continuing and future loyal customer. I'll need a new fishing license and gear soon. I'll be paying a visit! #NeverAgainMSD." Very few posters referenced being school teachers or school personnel (.6%, $n = 18$), but were especially thankful. As one said, "@DICKS As a public school teacher, THANK YOU! You are proof that not all corporations are cold and heartless!"

Discussion

This research has important implications from both an academic and applied perspective. To begin, this study highlights a small, but important, distinction between advocacy and activism. DICK's Sporting Goods actions extend well beyond issuing a public statement in the form of a tweet or Facebook post. DICK's leaders have met with families from Parkland, lawmakers, and other interested parties to "keep the conversation going" in support of the issue of gun control. Many of their statements have even highlighted the "loopholes and inconsistencies" (Stack, 2018, para. 10) in current gun laws in an effort to inform the public of the rationale behind its decision and the need for change.

DICK's could have simply supported the Parkland students' efforts and the need for change on this issue; however, the company may have been seen as hypocritical if it did not stand behind its corporate values with a change in corporate policy. Moreover, DICK's actions extend beyond what may be more rightly considered CSA, defined by Clemensen (2017) as "support for a cause," (p. 6) into calls for others to join the efforts to make substantive change. According to Thomas (2014), corporate participation on an issue alone may be an "empty signifier" if not tied to "building up capacities" among local populations and other stakeholder groups (p. 10). This case suggests a small but important distinction between advocacy and activism that future research may wish to consider. The findings from this study suggest DICK's actions have moved beyond support for the issue of gun control and the need for change (i.e., advocacy) into activism that includes informing others on the need for change and tangible actions with various stakeholder groups in an effort to make change happen, thus making DICK's a credible speaker on this topic.

Additionally, as stakeholder theory requires that corporations consider impacts beyond financial performance (Reiter, 2016), this study suggests CSA or CPA serve as a unique opportunity to both bridge and strengthen relationships with some stakeholder groups, while severing ties with others with whom corporate values may no longer align. Although DICK's Sporting Goods did seek to maintain connections with those who may have disagreed with its actions—through Stack's admission that he is a gun owner himself and by citing the opinion of Scalia, a judge known for his conservative leanings, that 2nd Amendment rights are not unlimited—DICK's nevertheless instituted its new policies with public fanfare and with the full understanding there would likely be polarized reactions and potentially negative impact on sales. Although the polarizing nature of CSA or CPA may result in negative short-term financial impacts, the long-term potential for gain among other stakeholder groups requires consideration. It seems likely that corporate actions under this umbrella almost always will involve privileging some stakeholders over others, while recognizing the heightened potential of generating negative attitudes among some groups.

Finally, this case study also demonstrates how collective action has the capacity to catapult an issue to the forefront of corporate action. The youth of Parkland through collective action became a relevant stakeholder group for DICK's Sporting Goods. Typically, secondary stakeholders often lack control over significant corporate resources, making them somewhat less relevant for consideration in corporate policies. According to King (2008), without shared experiences and grievances, secondary stakeholders may not look for collective solutions to influence the workings of a corporation. In this situation, however, the shared frustration and grief of the Parkland students have allowed these youth to galvanize support across the nation and globe, suggesting the start of a social movement that has, subsequently, spawned a new stakeholder group for a range of businesses and organizations (King, 2008), including DICK's Sporting Goods.

Social movement theory suggests three main factors contribute to collective action (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996), including mobilizing structures, political opportunities, and framing processes. In this case, DICK's framing of the changes in the company's gun policies as the right thing to do bolstered the company's capacity to call on lawmakers to institute broader change. According to King (2008), "Movements often lie dormant for some time even though sufficient dissatisfaction with some policy exists, only to take action later when institutional or structural opportunities present themselves" (p. 29). The youth movement following the Parkland shooting served as a moment in time (or political opportunity) for DICK's to either enter the conversation on gun control or distance itself from the issue. Now that DICK's has publicly changed its policies and loudly called on others (lawmakers in particular) to take action, other businesses, including Walmart (Reilly, 2018), have followed suit. The findings from this study suggest the company's simple framing of the issue as the right thing to do now presents an opportunity for lawmakers to move beyond political parties and interest groups and respond to these calls.

The social media content analysis shows here that, although engagement with this issue did drive the loss of some customers (Dodd & Supa, 2014), taking a stand on this issue created more positive than negative discussions about the company and more mentions of gaining compared to losing sales. As Dodd and Supa (2014) found, consumer alignment resulted in greater intentions to purchase. Similarly, findings in this study suggest that individuals with positive attitudes toward DICK's actions were more likely to mention shopping actions and sales than individuals with negative attitudes were to mention stopping or decreasing sales.

Although Korshun et al. (2016) found that companies perceived to be guided by their values were more expected to take a stand, DICK's did not appear to be such a company prior to this announcement. Despite prior research suggesting that results-oriented companies may appear to be met with hypocrisy when undertaking CSA, that did not appear to be the case for DICK's. As the social media content analysis showed, mentions of DICK's values and principles were quite high in regard to the actions it took to speak out and change its policies, which may shift consumers' perceptions about DICK's as a values-based company.

From a practical standpoint, this study suggests that CSA, especially when the actions veer into political activism, are likely to impact public perceptions of the company in regard to its driving values. For companies already deemed to be values-oriented (i.e., those companies that present themselves publicly as making decisions based on their values), stakeholders are likely to expect CSA and CPA in response to contentious social and political issues. For companies where public perceptions of their values are unknown or unclear, however, engaging in CSA or CPA is likely to situate perceptions of the company as being one that is driven by values. Although this strategy may be a consummate shift in public perceptions for some companies (from results- to values-oriented), for other companies this step may simply be a solidification of what some already perceive it to be. Regardless, the subsequent implications of being seen as a values-oriented company include the public expectation that the company must now weigh in, and perhaps even act on, important and contentious political and social issues in the future to avoid being seen as hypocritical. Companies must thoughtfully consider how they want to be viewed among important stakeholders and must regularly evaluate and realign stakeholder groups as corporate and public values shift.

Additionally, as emerging research suggests that companies can no longer afford not to take a stand on potentially socially and politically contentious issues (Korschun et al., 2016), companies will need to think carefully about which type of stand to choose and the best way to do so without negatively affecting the business. Advocacy or activism of this type often will be met with controversy and even backlash, as the recent example of the Red Hen restaurant in Virginia that refused service to U.S. White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders highlights (CBS News, 2018). The owner of the Red Hen expressed that "she asked Sanders to leave the restaurant Friday evening at the request of gay employees who object to how Sanders defended President Donald Trump's desire to bar transgender people from the military" (CBS News, 2018, para. 3). However, critics expressed that it was wrong (and sometimes illegal) to discriminate against customers because of political views. The stand that DICK's Sporting

Goods chose to take was more moderate in comparison and not overtly attacking one political party (although some may disagree). DICK's did not choose to stop all gun sales or refuse service to any political groups— only to stop the sale of assault-style rifles and to raise the minimum purchase age to 21. At least in the short-term DICK's stock prices are surging and overall sales are up (Smith, 2018), despite some lingering backlash from gun manufacturers and gun industry groups and associations.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study represents one look at a corporation stepping forward to speak out on a social and political issue. To begin, this case study provides an important, contemporary example of corporate actions that move beyond advocacy (speaking out on an issue) into political activism (acting on an issue), thus contributing to discussions within both public relations and marketing that refer to these activities. Future research exploring these differences in-depth could provide additional insight into both concepts and allow for consistency in terminology among the range of disciplines exploring these phenomena.

Additionally, although this research found overwhelmingly positive support for a seemingly contentious issue, future research should examine public response to other controversial CSA and CPA in different companies, different industries, and with different issues—and should examine trends in public attitudes and sales longitudinally versus in the short term. Future research might explore this topic through correlational data exploring how taking a stance impacts stock prices and/or earnings following the announcement over a longer period of time. Also important is experimental research examining variables that may affect public actions and attitudes in CSA and CPA scenarios, as well as how these activities affect relationship building with publics.

Finally, the limitations of analyzing twitter to reflect public sentiment also must be acknowledged. For example, bots and bot campaigns on twitter continue to be problematic and bot accounts clearly have been linked to attempts to manipulate public opinion on issues with partisan disagreement (Baraniuk, 2018). A USC study estimates that somewhere between 9% and 15% of the 330 million twitter user accounts are bots (Varol, Ferrara, Davis, Menczer, & Flammini, 2017). Additionally, as only one social media channel, the findings from an analysis of only twitter comments are not generalizable and may not reflect overall public sentiment toward the company, especially among those who are not online (or who choose not to voice their opinions online). Although social media afford an easy and somewhat-hidden opportunity to voice opposition to corporate policies and statements, future research examining public response to CSA and CPA also should consider public surveys and interviews, in conjunction with social media, for a more robust picture of overall sentiment.

Conclusion

Forbes Magazine recently listed “focused and forward-thinking brand activism” as one of eight CSR trends to look for in 2018 (McPherson, 2018, para. 4). The author defined this form of activism as reactive statements by CEOs and corporations in response to policies and presidential announcements, such as the U.S. immigration and transgender military bans and the withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Agreement. As corporations face mounting public pressure to respond to areas of social concern, research is needed to explore the strategies for doing so both in a reactive and proactive way. This research presents a unique look at how one company, DICK's Sporting Goods, responded to the social and political issue of gun control reform in response to the Parkland shooting. Findings revealed that DICK's actions extended beyond CSA into CPA, partly driven by secondary stakeholders. This CPA represented an opportunity for DICK's to redefine and realign its stakeholders while making its corporate values clearer to these stakeholder groups. Public response, as revealed through a content analysis of twitter posts, revealed overwhelming public sentiment for DICK's actions, and many of the posts stressed DICK's values and principles, including moral integrity, courage, sensibility, and leadership. Although some customers did mention they would no longer shop at DICK's, many more said they were becoming new customers, or, if current customers, would be increasing their shopping, and many provided evidence in the form of pictures of receipts and shopping bags. Customers were the most frequently mentioned stakeholder group; however, society/community, parents, and children/youth also were mentioned.

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