



Progressive Public Relations, Sweatshops, and the Net

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The anti-Nike sweatshop movement represents an emerging form of conscious, civic consumerism. In the short term, activists, many of them U.S. university students, have been successful at politicizing the decisions of marketing and sports establishments at major universities by focusing media attention on the production-consumption chain of university merchandise through sit-ins and demonstrations. The public reaction of Nike's CEO, Phil Knight, to these events vaulted the students' concerns into the mainstream media.

Building on lessons from the South African divestment effort, students recognize that institutions to which they pay tuition can be used to make institutional and political change. In addition, activists have also framed the sweatshop issue to their contemporaries in terms of individual consumer choice—a mark of personal identity politics—and put their creativity to work by staging unorthodox “sweatshop fashion shows” at Nike-towns, GAP stores, and Abercrombie and Fitch.

This article has two objectives. First, it tracks the role of these public relations professionals in shaping and defining the sweatshop awareness movement, and second, it examines the campaign against Nike as a window into an emerging form of political activism suited to computer-savvy youth, lifestyle politics, global interdependency, and consumer choice. Linked by e-mail, the Internet, and common symbols, these political actors, mostly under the age of 30, are becoming increasingly visible players in the media debate about transnational corporate responsibility in the global economy.

E-Mail Magic

The flow of information is the life-blood of the anti-sweatshop movement. New communication technologies provide effective means to organize and mobilize supporters

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with the click of a mouse, circumventing traditional channels of political communication. International List-servs link activists across national boundaries within seconds. News articles about factory conditions, wages, and strikes in Jakarta newspapers circulate to more than 150 university campuses through the United Students Against Sweatshops network.

In this new media environment, linked together by communication technologies, student groups have been successful in raising the visibility of global concerns. Advocacy groups monitor powerful transnational corporations and seek to use the media to provide alternative channels of information, with measurable and significant effects.

Through Internet communication, local or regional activists mobilize protests. "Right now, every time we do an action, we send out an e-mail and a hundred people show up," Medea Benjamin (personal communication, December 13, 1999) of Global Exchange explained. "It's like magic. We couldn't do it without e-mail."

E-mail and Web sites also serve as effective channels between NGOs and labor advocates abroad and U.S. or Europe-based activists. Employees can be afraid to speak out publicly in their own country out of fear they could be arrested. But if the same information reaches the international audience, it can filter back to the source, mediated by the Internet, and turn a local dispute into an international matter to be discussed and acted upon. Transnational activist networks, such as www.nikeworkers.org of *Press for Change* and the *National Labor Committee's* www.nclnet.org, provide a forum through which these voices can be heard, and interested parties can argue, develop strategies, and exchange information. These networks are predictably selective and often biased, and some voices are amplified while others are ignored (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Like the partisan press, users of the Net presume their information comes with particular agendas. Yet in a world where certified experts, shadowy WTO leaders, and political elites dominate the discussion of vital trade and environmental issues, these communication networks serve as a caldron of alternative visions and information that can find their ways into international debate. E-mail and Internet Web sites suit well the rapidly changing relationships in world politics, enabling information to reach enormous audiences within seconds. In this movement, activists have framed the sweatshop issue in terms of a convergence of interests between third world workers and American consumers.

Target Selection: Why Nike? Why Phil Knight?

Why did Nike become a target rather than Reebok? Every social movement needs a visible villain, and in a media-driven political world, the anti-sweatshop activists could not have asked for a better one than Phil Knight, the founder and CEO of the largest sports-shoe business in the world, Nike. With its high profile in the media through its "Just Do It" advertising slogan, high-priced athlete endorsements, the opening of Nike-town mega-stores, and the increasing, ubiquitous presence of "the Swoosh" on clothing and on college campuses, consumers under 30 relate to Nike.

In Indonesia, low wages made the country a destination for companies like Nike, and Indonesian labor has been a key part of the company's economic success. During 1988 and 1989, sporadic signs of labor discontent appeared in the international and Indonesian press. In 1992, the minimum wage in Indonesia ranged from 50 cents a day to \$1.50 a day (Schwarz, 1994, pp. 257–263). A survey carried out in 1989 by the Asian-American Free Labor Institute found that 56% of the companies were paying less than the Indonesian minimum wage. Subcontractors at Nike factories would avoid paying the minimum wage by keeping workers at the training wage level for months or years at a time.

The data were available: Survey research documented poor working conditions and failure to pay the minimum living wage. This provided information to catch the eye of the press: A pair of Nike Air Jordans retailing at \$150 cost only a fraction of that to make. This is a link around which activists could organize and use the Nike symbols and celebrities to move the sweatshop issue into the realm of personal identity politics. Buying running shoes is a way to take a position on sweatshop labor, an act of a conscious consumer.

How Progressive Public Relations Gave Legs to the Anti-Sweatshop Campaign

Between 1989 and 1995, only 21 news articles appeared in the U.S. press linking Nike to strikes in Indonesia, but 1996 was a pivotal year in the anti-sweatshop campaign. Seven years of survey research, international studies on globalization and human rights, and organizing by NGOs came to fruition. But it took a celebrity and a fired Nike worker to put a human face on the sweatshop issue and escalate the conflict in the mainstream American media.

Behind every media event lies the people who make it happen: journalists, sources, and, in these cases, politically committed publicists working in the nonprofit sector. In 1996, two key connections transformed the anti-sweatshop campaign. First, Jeff Ballinger, who did the initial wage compliance study in Indonesia, hooked up with Global Exchange, a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization dedicated to human rights and promoting socially responsible businesses with its own internal public relations person, Tony Newman. Second, National Labor Committee chief Charles Kernaghan listened to the media-savvy Ellen Braune, who helped him see the logic in launching a campaign against a popular morning television talk-show host who lent her name to discount clothing made in maquiladoras. When Kathie Lee Gifford cried on her morning talk show, bewailing how she “didn’t know” her clothes were made by teenage girls working 14- and 16-hour days in Honduras, the sweatshop issue burst into the living rooms of television-watching America. Charles Kernaghan, tagged “the guy who made Kathie Lee cry,” used the media exposure to tell the listening and viewing publics about the poorly paid workers who worked long hours for little money. (Some of those publics were members of Congress who called for government intervention; that intervention culminated in the creation of the “Fair Labor Association.”)

The selection of these visually compelling and contrasting characters who spoke out against sweatshop conditions in the apparel and shoe industries resulted from the combined efforts of long time activists who had been tracking the issue and compiling data before they joined forces with media relations professionals. These media professionals helped select the targets, honed the messages, arranged media events, coordinated publicity, and created the highly visual and dramatic media events that the anti-sweatshop campaign lacked earlier.

Cracks in the Coalition

On May 12, 1998, Nike chairman Phil Knight announced that his company would change the way it does business overseas, raising the minimum age to 18 for new workers at shoe factories and 16 for those at other plants. Nike agreed to tighten air quality controls and, by 2002, to only order footwear from factories that offer after-hours education to qualified workers.

Knight was silent on the issues of wages and the length of the work day. Nike contracted with a factory in China whose employees said they worked 11- and 12-hour days with only two days off a month, and earned 16 cents to 19 cents an hour with no overtime. The anti-Nike campaign has responded by expanding its data collection in China and continuing to monitor conditions in other factories.

Coalitions bring multiple agendas to movements for social change, and a divisive point is deciding when, and under what conditions, to call an end to the protests. Some students could rest content if their particular college lends its logo to companies that adhere to a “clean clothes” policy, or if their friends buy running shoes made by New Balance and Sacony rather than Nike and Reebok. Some labor activists want labor rights written into trade agreements. Others want the workers in the global economy to have the right to organize democratic trade unions without interference from employers, and receive a living wage based on recognized standards of living in each country.

At an April 2000 conference inaugurating the Workers Rights Consortium at New York University, splits on strategy caused friction. Medea Benjamin applauded Nike for eliminating toxic glues that posed a health hazard to workers in Vietnamese factories. She listed the victories of having pressured Nike in Indonesia so that its contractors comply with minimum wage laws. Several criticized the perceived conciliatory approach to a corporate bad guy and were resolute in keeping up the pressure until Nike would ensure the rights of workers to negotiate.

The Workers Rights Consortium (WRC) is a coalition with labor unions and human rights groups. In the three weeks after its founding, 45 universities signed on with the commitment to be sure items that carry the university logos are not made in sweatshops. Phil Knight again raised the visibility of the students’ issues by taking a hard, public stand against universities that have signed on with the WRC. He withdrew a \$30 million commitment to his alma mater, the University of Oregon in Eugene, because the university joined the WRC (Greenhouse, 2000), and sparked a new round of stories in the print and broadcast media.

The U.S.-based anti-sweatshop coalition is a moving target whose focus is expanding beyond clothing and shoes to working conditions and wages in computer and electronics assembly factories, toy factories, and other industries in export and industrial zones in Asia, Latin America, and the United States. Cracks in the coalition are beginning to appear when some members want to declare victory on specific campaigns and move on to other ones, and others are resolute that victory should not be declared until companies agree to sit down and bargain with workers about wages and working conditions. The story is not over.

A Cyber “We”?

The anti-sweatshop movement is an example of *a la carte* politics and a form of resistance appropriate to the transnational, globally interdependent economy. As a mode of engagement, anti-sweatshop activists are linking factory workers and consumers across geographical boundaries through the production-to-consumer continuum. They are translating shared beliefs and values into concrete, daily practices, like shopping choices. Fueled by the easy exchange of information through e-mail and the Internet and by coordinated action across borders through NGOs and computers, these activists represent a form of global civic engagement that is suitable to the present communication environment. Their actions would not have been possible without the years of research on sweatshop conditions, the progressive public relations professionals who raised the

visibility of this research by putting human faces on the global economy, and the activists equipped with Internet access. A final thought: These activists who defy geographical boundaries seem to be forging a global, cyber “we,” and this could be an example of a new practice of community appropriate to the “new capitalism” as articulated by Richard Sennett (1998).¹

Notes

1. Sennett (1998) does not use the term “cyber we,” but he does write about “we” as “the dangerous pronoun” and argues that Aa place becomes a community when people use the pronoun, ‘we’” (p. 137). I am suggesting that the anti-sweatshop movement is an example of community formation in cyber-space: “Place” is virtual. Mutual responsibility, trust, and commitment pose challenges in cyber civic engagement as they do in face-to-face politics. These are enduring factors, as the cracks in the coalition in the anti-sweatshop campaign indicate.

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