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## **MOVING OUT OF THE TARGET ZONE: WHAT TO DO WHEN THE ACTIVISTS ATTACK®**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Anti-corporate activism is alive and growing in intensity. Targets are major brands, global businesses, institutions that appear to disenfranchise or victimize people, adversely affect the environment, harm animals, and areas of consumer manufacturing where the brand, usually American, uses off-shore (that is, third world or lesser-developed) countries for sourcing, or large numbers of immigrants within the U.S. itself. This is a reputation issue of the highest order. For some, the issue may even be perceived as one of brand survival.

### **MOVING OUT OF THE BULL'S EYE**

How do you move out of the bull's eye when activists attack? Here are 12 key facts with useful right way/wrong way commentary and lessons to guide you.

#### **1. Activist Organizations Work Together Easily:**

- Often labor connected, but not always.
- Invariably networked with an array of non-government organizations (NGOs) created for the purpose of advocating, organizing, or attacking on behalf of some cause, country, or issue.
- Frequently religiously connected, even church affiliated.
- A fervor and dedication to their situations and causes that seem almost unreasonable due to an extraordinarily high level of zeal.

**Right Way Lesson:** Understand the power of activism and the activist mentality. Prepare to negotiate. Why? Because people who defend the victimized often seem irrationally intense in their fervor. It will take a series of conversations just to begin establishing common ground for negotiation.

**Wrong Way Lesson:** Believing the myth that recognizing activists, or answering their questions, gives them power. The fact is that activists and victims come with enough power to change any brand and the status of any executive, in any organization, should they care or need to try.

## 2. **Activist Action Patterns Are Characteristic:**

- Attack the most well-known brands, companies, or celebrities. More visibility, less work.
- Generate video of chain link fences topped with barbed wire and soldiers or guards alleging slavery or mass victimization.
- Use “testimony” from real workers who are “victims.” Trigger litigation where possible.
- Take one or two very young female “victims,” preferably pregnant, tour them around the United States even other countries, and encourage them to make inflammatory testimonial allegations against the target.
- Organize and recruit supporters through religious groups and labor unions to stage demonstrations and attention-getting events (but usually not boycotts).
- Humiliate the brand, company, celebrity, or public official, then demand the target resolve their bad behaviors, even taking a much larger role in social initiatives and questions.

**Right Way Lesson:** Anti-corporate actions can be anticipated both through aggressive enforcement of standards of conduct and compliance review, and by paying attention to the perceptions created by appearances. Be prepared to aggressively pre-empt these characteristic patterns of action. One way is to look at your facilities through the “eyes” of the TV camera and the victim, then prepare your own video story, facility-by-facility.

**Wrong Way Lesson:** Resist, push back, and refuse to “give in” because you may look like a sissy to your colleagues or peer organizations. They are not the ones under attack, you are.

## 3. **Tactical Goals Are Also Predictable:**

- Alarm consumers. (Get supporters to avoid the brand, but to ask questions.)
- Interpret situations incorrectly on purpose. (Build fear or hate through slanted, emotionalized examples.)
- Intervene in the business. (Get control of the brand through demands and accusations.)
- Publicize allegations. (Always taken uncritically by the media. Reporters feel good about helping with a “cause”.)
- Speculate on motives. (Humiliate individuals within the target organization by emphasizing salary and bonus, greed and insensitivity, and questioning morals and ethics.)
- Allege intimidating conditions. (Death threats, harm, or harassment and discrimination against pregnant workers, whistleblowers, and anyone raising their voices.)

***Right Way Lesson:*** These tactical goals mirror what today’s journalists and sympathetic blowiators view as their daily mission: saving at least a part of the world from something bad (you) every day. These approaches are powerful and will have impact. It’s impossible to change these goals. Therefore, they must be anticipated, accommodated, and addressed. Be an excellent company and preempt these allegations at the earliest possible moment.

***Wrong Way Lesson:*** Whine and moan about how “those people” will cause enormously higher costs and drive away your business, losing jobs and livelihoods. “It’s their fault, not ours, if we have to close.”

Find ways to prevent critics and opponents for taking credit for policies and procedures you’ve changed as a result of their complaints, demonstrations, or allegations.

4. **The Allegations Are Nearly Always the Same:**

- Child labor.
- Discrimination, especially against pregnant and younger women.
- Extraordinary forced over-time work.
- Forced birth control.
- Forced labor.
- Inappropriate medical intervention (especially with young women).
- Intimidation.
- Less than living wages.
- Psychological coercion.
- Punitive employee relations.
- Slave or indentured labor.

***Right Way Lesson:*** While most codes of conduct accommodate and deal with these issues, too often there’s no affirmative evidence of such abuses until after the allegations have been made and the damage to reputation done. Find ways, such as independent monitoring and effective internal enforcement, to ensure that abuses are prevented, detected, corrected, and deterred. Publicly condemn and report slavery conditions.

***Wrong Way Lesson:*** Complain that the allegations are old, well worn, and long since taken care of. If it’s in the news today, it’s today’s news.

5. **Prepare for the Great Irritations:**

- Emotional communication and action replace facts and reasonableness.
- Activism overshadows systematic information and evidence.
- Exaggeration overwhelms reality.
- Grassroots tactics and manipulation are the activists’ customer and employee mobilization strategy.
- Everyone seems to be your victim.

***Right Way Lesson:*** In this emotionally powerful environment, there’s often very little in the way of concrete evidence on either side. The imperative is to anticipate and respond with a sense of control and focus. Real on-the-ground facts and information can be controlling if independently monitored, certified, or verified. Get it certified or clarified, and get there first.

**Wrong Way Lesson:** Rely on internal resources and internal investigations. Neither are credible. Whenever internal resources are relied upon, the phrase “cover up” is used automatically.

6. **There Is Good News:**

- Others are getting through this.
- There can be positive surprises.
- The results will be underwhelming.

**Right Way Lesson:** The goal should be a better life for workers, stronger societies, better economic results, and therefore better lives for everyone. These results are, by definition, very unnewsworthy and likely to be ignored by both the media and the activists. Happy farms and factories are not news.

**Wrong Way Lesson:** Complain about people with no credentials who get credibility from the press, bloggers, politicians, and even other business people. Why? (Because that’s the way it is and is going to be.)

Why is it that our own information and data are being used against us, erroneously, and we’re getting blamed for their mistakes? (Again, this is the way it is and the way it’s going to be.) Will we ever get credit for being a good company? Yes, but criticism will continue, too.

7. **Beware of Allies; Focus on Critics; Get Your Story Out There:**

- You’ll fight and win your battles largely by yourself (but remember what winning actually means).
- Industry buddies may be too preoccupied to help, happy that you are the target and they are not, or expect you to “hold the line.” Those that do offer, almost always have agendas that are more important to them than yours. Allowing allies in empowers them to work in their own best interests, at all times. When push comes to shove, allies will probably sacrifice your interests.
- The media will rarely “take your side” and are often inclined to report beyond activist exaggeration simply because it takes more shouting to be heard now than before.

**Right Way Lesson:** If you look for allies, chances are you’ll find them outside your industry or by working collaboratively with those who are accusing you and their supporters. Industry solutions to activist attack are rarely successful and often cause only more controversy. Industry allies are almost never able to say and do the right things at the right time or in the right sequence. Using allies often condemns you to use the lowest common denominator approach, and to avoid appropriate responses and initiatives that your “allies” may take exception or offense to. Ironically, it’s the opposition that tends to be more welcoming and helpful.

**Wrong Way Lesson:** Take a “whole industry” approach to demonstrate that the issues and complaints are relatively minor or “isolated incidents” in comparison to the size of the industry. “Unified defenses” never really work. The lawyers will disagree, executives will disagree, and most importantly the activists, naysayers, and complainers now have a

huge, fat, juicy target that's much richer for damage opportunities than working one company or organization at a time.

8. **Think Counter-intuitively:**

- Your usual practices will be interpreted as corporate stalling and stonewalling.
- Your most factual analysis and statements will be considered biased, incomplete, and tainted.
- Your immediate involvement in the resolution process will be interpreted as manipulation and cover up.
- Your attempts to control the dialogue, limit the damage, or impose a solution will be characterized as public relations tactics.
- Incremental progress will be challenged as unsatisfactory—a stalling tactic designed to save money.
- Be prepared for unexpected allegations. Act quickly.
- Learn to live with persistent, intentional misinterpretation:
  - Progress is often described as mistake repair.
  - Direct financial support or sponsorships are often interpreted as attempts to buy or bribe.
  - Individual attempts to investigate or clarify are viewed as obstructionist or cover-ups.
  - Economic arguments are interpreted as arrogant, insensitive, and anti-worker.

**Right Way Lesson:** Stay focused on the ultimate goal. Answer every question, even those that have yet to be asked. Calm people down. Build and maintain the confidence and trust of your own employees and workers, first. Solve one or two problems at a time today because tomorrow will bring another set of issues. Leaping ahead will be difficult. Make incremental progress every day. Make certain that those who are affected, directly or indirectly, know progress is being made and what your next steps are. Avoid using the media as a forum or a messenger. The media make mistakes due to reporters' lack of understanding, overt sympathy, or to cause serious embarrassment and misinterpretation. Be prepared for the impact of the new media techniques.

**Wrong Way Lesson:** Get upset easily. Let your testosterosis drive your decisions and actions. Seek some sort of conclusive, definitive resolution of issues and questions. Look for ways to discredit, demean, and deny the allegations, positions, and opinions of your opposition.

9. **Reduce the Legacy (Radio, TV, Newspapers, Magazines, Cable Shows) Media's Power:**

- Plan to directly interact with those whose lives, families, and future you affect, which makes what the media say or do less important.
- Constantly correct, clarify, and comment on the record on your Web site.
- Talk with the opposition directly.
- Reach out to communities through the farming activity and other commercial interactions, constantly.
- Keep public officials informed.
- The opposition knows how sloppy you are about dealing with mushy problems; get focused.

- It's always easier to challenge your credibility—thus making you defensive—rather than to challenge the facts.
- Get your facts straight. Be credible.
- The threat of some action to be taken against you, especially if amplified by the news media or in the blogosphere, always seems more powerful than the action itself.

**Right Way Lesson:** Reducing the media's power is necessary and critical to truly helping workers and getting your story across. Failure to directly address the elements of activist action and media behavior confers credibility on the opposition and gives unnecessary additional impact to the news media. The ultimate reality is that support among employees and other constituent groups can be mercurial and difficult to maintain. Therefore, the most direct strategies and tactics are the most preferable, likely to moderate any attack, and achieve better on-the-ground results.

**Wrong Way Lesson:** Ignoring the media, failing to answer questions, reacting defensively and irritably are approaches that will ultimately, but quickly, become toxic to any communication that is done. Honorable companies, organizations, and individuals can promptly answer any question posed to them. Honorable companies and honorable people understand the fears, concerns, and questions those who oppose may have, and work to answer questions, and reduce concerns and fears at every possible turn.

#### 10. **Ultimate Realities:**

- Timidity and hesitation cause embarrassment and defeat.
- Activist attacks have impact and predictable consequences.
- Taking public credit often makes you a target.
- Each effective attack teaches activists success lessons for their next target.
- Getting it right, on the ground, is the ultimate priority.

**Right Way Lesson:** There are no end points, no clear victories. For each victory you attempt to declare, another set of allegations will surface. Let the opposition take the credit. Positive, constructive approaches suck the energy out of anger and contentious situations.

**Wrong Way Lesson:** Be angry, overbearing, and overly serious. Attempt to manipulate public officials to be on your side or to support some industry perspective. Mistakenly believe that denying things, stalling, and making decisions more complicated will somehow defeat or sap the energy of opponents and critics.

#### 11. **Credibility-building Communication Principles:**

- “When problems occur, we’ll be prepared to talk openly about them and act quickly to respond to them operationally.”
- “If key constituencies should know about an issue or problem that could affect them, we’ll voluntarily talk about it as quickly and as completely as we can.”
- “When problems or changes occur, we’ll keep those key constituencies posted on a schedule they set until the problem or changes have been thoroughly explained or resolved.”
- “We’ll answer any questions those constituencies may have and suggest and volunteer additional information on matters they haven’t yet asked questions about.”

- “We’ll be cooperative with the news media, but our primary responsibility is to communicate directly and as soon as possible with those most directly affected by our actions.
- “We’ll respect and seek to work with those who oppose us.”

***Right Way Lesson:*** Prompt, positive, specific, responsive action is the most potent, controlling, and fundamentally sound communication strategy. In fact, the more you do along these lines, the less you need to communicate. Action must precede communication or the results are spin and the damage spin causes.

***Wrong Way Lesson:*** Delay, denial, and defensive threatening ultimately empowers those who oppose us.

## 12. **Break the Cycle:**

### Principles:

- Principle 1: Act credibly; build trust; wage peace.
- Principle 2: Drive the process by being outcome focused (avoid the past).
- Principle 3: Be satisfied with incremental progress.
- Principle 4: Avoid forecasts; stay focused; predict underwhelming results.
- Principle 5: Respect and appreciate each constituency’s concerns and beliefs.

### Action Steps:

- Step 1: Create a communications environment that will support your goals from the community’s/customer’s perspective.
- Step 2: Act aggressively, with a positive attitude.
- Step 3: Focus on the process of resolution.
- Step 4: Prepare to manage (endure) unintended, constantly changing consequences.
- Step 5: Look ahead. What killer issues are on the horizon? Get ready.

***Right Way Lesson:*** Take positive, aggressive action. Move quickly. Use common sense. Be inclusive rather than exclusive. Recognize that the language, beliefs, and thought processes of the opposition, while totally different from yours, are reconcilable. Remember that you’ll be held to a standard of behavior and human rights performance as though all your operations were inside a single building just outside Kansas City, Missouri.

***Wrong Way Lesson:*** Seek to win definitive decisions rather than engaging, negotiating, accommodating, and sharing victories.

## **CONCLUSION**

Anti-corporate activist action will continue to escalate. The bigger the brand or operation, or more global the enterprise, the better a potential target it becomes. Moving out of the target zone is becoming increasingly more challenging. That’s because:

- The most challenging activist attacks are carried out by individuals motivated by circumstances only they know.

- Some activist campaigns are becoming more sophisticated than corporate response capabilities.
- Activist campaigns are becoming less focused and dependent on the “media” and more focused on creating trade barriers, creating market barriers such as customer interference, impeding access to capital through pressure on institutional investors, and directly attacking individuals and organizations who are the end users rather than consumers.
- Activist campaigns are building a substantial track record of success. Target companies are recognizing that indirect action against them is often more powerful, more corrosive, and harder to control.
- Large organizations, agencies, institutions, and organizations continue to make mistakes and behave badly, unethically, or illegally thus making themselves targets for anti-corporate or anti-institutional action.

Getting and staying out of the target zone essentially means the following:

- Commit to principled, open behaviors that address issues promptly, directly, and positively.
- Get to the high ground fast. Avoid the usual denials, victim confusion, and antagonistic behaviors along the way.
- Put yourself in the activist’s shoes as well as the shoes of other major stakeholders. Act from their perspective. Ultimately, these will be the only actions that will be acceptable. Start doing it today.
- Focus on clear, useful, positive goals that can be “given away” to others for the credit. You get to survive; they get to beat their chests.
- Be cautious in building phony coalitions on issues that matter. Every member works his or her own agenda. It’s pointless. The only organization capable of managing its own destiny is the one that is the focus of the attack.
- Recognize that response to activism basically feels defensive and protective. The goal may simply be preservation of market share, reputation, customer base, or constituent relationships. Be satisfied with a useful, positive result in which everyone gains something, but where many remain angry, some are disappointed, the media seem anything but completely happy, and the bloviators are continuing to talk, whine, and scream. This is, in fact, how we now define victory in confrontational settings.

