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**12/10/13**  
**APR 432**

## **Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade Case Study**

### **Introduction**

Macy's is not only a popular retail location, but it hosts the annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. The Thanksgiving Parade was established in 1924 by Macy's employees and its purpose "is to provide quality entertainment while bringing children and families together on this most cherished national holiday." The parade has been around for 87 years and many Americans have included the parade into their holiday celebrations. All elements of the parade are designed by artisans at Macy's design studio. The parade route starts at 77<sup>th</sup> Street in New York City and ends at the Macy's in Herald Square. The most popular balloon that has been featured in the parade is Snoopy. Snoopy has had seven different balloons, with the most recent one in this year's parade. A brief history of the parade is below (About Macy's):

- 1924: originally named Macy's Christmas Parade, the parade used animals from the Central Park Zoo
- 1929: Helium was released from the balloons during the parade, so at the end they would be released and whoever found them received a gift from Macy's
- 1934: Macy's collaborated with Disney and created the first ever Mickey Mouse balloon
- 1942-1944: parade suspended during WW2, because the parade supplies were needed for war efforts

- 1946: parade was televised for the first time ever locally and a “falloon” (float and balloon) was created
- 1947: parade televised nationally for the first time
- 1957: A Popeye balloon poured rain water on parade-goers after the pipe overflowed during a downpour
- 1968: Macy’s workers began to build floats for the parade
- 1996: the process of inflating the floats before the parade becomes an event for anyone to go watch
- 2013: the 87<sup>th</sup> Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade takes place

Over the years there has been controversy over different floats riding in the parade, but the controversies this year may take the cake. Macy’s faced three separate controversies alone this year, involving; a SeaWorld float and PETA; Joan Jett and The Blackhearts and the state of South Dakota; and outrage about a performance from the Broadway show, “Kinky Boots.”

### **Description of PR Efforts**

I believe the main objective of the parade is to provide entertainment, while increasing viewership each year. To do this Macy’s needs to form partnerships with different organizations. Once these relationships are established, Macy’s can start discussions about creating floats for the parade that tie in with the new partnerships and arrange for entertainers to perform on these floats. Once these relationships and discussions are finalized all parties involved can promote their respective floats and the parade. I think Macy’s did all of these steps and this is where the underlying factor of all the controversies is.

Macy's created a float relating to the whales at SeaWorld for this year's parade. There was a movie titled *Blackfish* released this year displaying the poor treatment of whales at SeaWorld. Many have viewed this film and because of it, there was outrage that Macy's would promote SeaWorld at its parade. People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) took this by storm, encouraging people to protest the parade and to fight to get the float taken out of the parade. (Newman). According to USA Today, a spokesperson from PETA said, "It shows orcas swimming in a majestic sea alongside their families, and this couldn't be further from the truth. SeaWorld deprives them of all these things. They confine them to concrete tanks and take them away from their families. The picture that this float presents is absurdly false." The supporters of PETA had several tweets aimed at the parade and commented on any post that Macy's made, even if the post pertained to clothing apparel. The protestors took advantage of any social platform Macy's had and used them to voice their opinions.

In response Macy's kept its stance that the parade was for entertainment purposes and the parade had not taken on any political debates or social discussions. A spokesperson for Macy's said the parade is "solely devoted to entertainment," and is not interested in getting involved in any "social commentary, political debate or other forms of advocacy." The Macy's statement goes directly along with what is written on its corporate website. Macy's released this statement to the media, but did not comment on any social media platform. Despite the public protests, the float with the whales drove along the path to Herald Square with the likes of Snoopy, cheerleaders and marching bands in the parade. (Gastaldo).

Macy's held the same stance when dealing with ranchers from South Dakota. These ranchers were concerned that Joan Jett and The Blackhearts were performing on the South Dakota tourism float. Joan Jett is a vegetarian and known supporter of PETA. South Dakota is

a state known for cattle ranching and the ranchers did not want a vegetarian performing on their float, because Joan's values were different. According to CNN, Joan Jett said she "decided to switch from South Dakota to another float because people's political agendas were getting in the way of what should be a purely entertainment driven event. I will remain focused on entertaining the millions of people watching, who will be celebrating a great American tradition."

Macy's had Joan Jett and The Blackhearts moved to another float to ensure South Dakota was comfortable with who was representing its state. Joan made a public statement and made it know she was okay with the switch. Joan's views went along with Macy's that, "the Parade has never taken on, promoted or otherwise engaged in social commentary, political debate, or other forms of advocacy, no matter how worthy. Its mission has always been about entertaining millions of families and spectators." (Draznin)

The switch was a relatively quiet move and the two parties involved made it clear that the purpose of the parade was to provide a fun and entertaining event for all segments of viewers. There was no comment made by Macy's on any social media platforms, just a spokesperson commenting to the media. This controversy was heavily discussed before the parade, but the SeaWorld float situation heavily overshadowed it. Throughout these two controversies, Macy's was sure to emphasize the same key messages within its statement. It really wanted to clarify that the parade is purely entertainment-based and does not have any relationship or affiliation with politics, social messages or any type of view that goes against its own ethics.

Many were outraged when a set from the Broadway show, "Kinky Boots," was performed at the parade. The Huffington Post describes the show as an "award-winning Broadway musical about a shoe factory owner and a drag queen who work together to turn the family

business around.” Those that were displeased with the performance argued that Macy’s was trying to send a message about “tolerance, acceptance and friendship.” With the previous two controversies, Macy’s had definitely established its views and ethical codes. The company had previously stated that the parade was purely for entertainment purposes. With all the public criticism, a spokesperson from Macy’s said, “Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade has always spotlighted the best of Broadway since the ’60’s, and this year is no exception. As 2013’s Tony award-winning best musical, ‘Kinky Boots’ is not only a hit with Broadway fans, but Black Friday shoppers... Please have them call us and we’ll set them up with our personal shoppers.” Cast members, mostly male, from “Kinky Boots” also voiced their opinions by showing up to Macy’s at Herald Square in stilettos and one member even in full drag attire. The show also used its social media and tweeted its support of its cast and its performance. (Bennett-Smith).

When dealing with these controversies, I think Macy’s objective was to inform parade viewers that the function of the annual parade is to provide a form of entertainment. Its strategy is to implement the parade year after year and include new partnerships to promote the event. When people complain about these new additions to the parade, Macy’s disperses information to the mass media to get its voice into news articles. It also has all of this written down on a section on its website pertaining to the parade.

### **Critique and Analysis**

When considering the ROPE method (research, objectives, programming, evaluation), I do not think Macy’s put too much effort into the research section. The main objective of the parade is to create a fun form of entertainment for millions across The United States to watch. For the programming aspect, Macy’s has garnered television coverage from major

television networks and created #MacysParade for people to use on social media. The inflation of the balloons for the parade is a more recent event and it attracts large numbers to watch. The actual parade has thousands line up to watch it, with millions viewing it on television. Macy's has said that an average of 50 million watch its parade. There is not much evaluation done other than viewer numbers. The creation of the hashtag allows Macy's to monitor all that is being said about the parade and the company can use a number of different social media monitoring sites to see the full coverage. I would hope Macy's would track social media mentions, shares, retweets, likes, etc. Social media platforms are where people are most expressive, so it would be beneficial to see what everyone said about the parade in order to make it better next year. (Policies/Position).

I think Macy's creates this parade each year solely for entertainment purposes, so the main research it would do would be to find out what is most popular in the U.S. and create a float or balloon for it. It does not appear that Macy's did any research about controversial topics pertaining to floats, since there were two large-scale issues. I believe the company stood true to its values and wanted to put on a controversy-free event, yet with some more research it could have seen the PETA issues coming. The whale issue has been around since 2010, when a trainer was killed at SeaWorld. It takes a while to construct a float, but Macy's had plenty of time before construction began to think of a less controversial idea. The movie *Blackfish* was released July 19, 2013, giving Macy's over four months to figure out a solution to its float, but they kept it. I applaud Macy's for keeping the float and sticking to its theme of purely entertainment, but Macy's could have avoided all of the drama around the float if it had conducted research about what viewers want and do not want.

It seems obvious to me that Macy's did not look into who was performing on which

float, because one would think it is a poor decision to place a vegetarian on a float promoting cattle farming. When dealing with these controversial situations, Macy's should look to the PRSA Code of Ethics to either decide what to do or to evaluate the decision it made.

*Advocacy*- In the PRSA Code of Ethics it states, "we serve the public interest by acting as responsible advocates for those we represent." If Macy's went by this, it would be an advocate for SeaWorld, meat eaters and gay rights. However, Macy's chose to not be an advocate for any relationship the company had created for the parade. Public relations wise, I think the PR firm should be an advocate for its client, but with Macy's I think it does not need to advocate for its partners, because it chose the stance to advocate for its own company and for the parade. (PRSSA).

*Honesty*-Macy's was honest when dealing with media, however the company should have provided statements via social media. It was almost as if the company pretended that the three float issues never occurred, because Macy's did not post any comments or pictures on its social media sites. Macy's released a statement afterward about "Kinky Boots," but did not post it in a written statement. I think Macy's could have been more transparent about what it was doing to address the critiques and concerns.

*Expertise*- The Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade has a very credible reputation. After 87 years, Macy's must be doing something right. The company has also built several relationships with many entertainers and organizations throughout the years. Macy's may not have the most expertise with public relations, but its efforts to give consistent statements to the media have upheld its brand for many years.

*Independence*-This principle represents accountability. Macy's did not take accountability for its floats and the controversy the floats caused. Macy's only addressed the core meaning of the

parade and took no responsibility for anything its floats represented. I think this is one of the things that made viewers upset. If Macy's had addressed concerns, it may have reassured some viewers.

*Loyalty*-Macy's was very loyal to those in the parade. It did not remove the whale float, supported the "Kinky Boots" performance and worked out the situation between Joan Jett and South Dakota. I like that Macy's stood behind each of its floats and worked to make sure everyone within the parade was content.

*Fairness*-Macy's allowed parade viewers to express their disagreement with actions taken, but they still allowed the floats to go on. The company stood up for the Broadway performance, came up with a solution for Joan Jett and South Dakota and allowed the whale float to be in the parade. By doing this, I think Macy's kept everything very balanced and even.

## **Recommendations**

Macy's should have done much more research on its partnerships and floats to see if there were controversies surrounding any of them. Macy's then should have ensured with each float sponsor and performer that their values matched up so they could represent each other. Because of this lack of research, Macy's faced multiple controversies. With that tiny amount of research, it could have spared Macy's any negative publicity. I think Macy's could have done a much better job about remaining transparent by posting all its statements to its personal social media accounts.

It seemed like each news article I read sent the reader to a different news outlet to get further information. *USA Today* had one quote and then sent the reader to *The New York Times* to find out more information. I think it would be best to have all information distributed to all



media outlets equally. I did not see one specific location that Macy's released any type of statement, yet the media had comments from spokespeople. These spokespeople were also not named, which clouds the transparency of the organization. I think it would have been best to have the statements on the social media accounts. I know that putting these statements on social media platforms allows for people to comment with harsh criticism, but the people were commenting on the other posts made by Macy's and it detracted from the message Macy's was trying to send: the parade is solely for entertainment. This message is clearly on the Macy's corporate website, but is nowhere on social media. Social media is extremely important when it comes to engaging and informing the audience.

“Social media is where your voice is heard. If you aren't saying something in that space, someone else will. That's scary, because they might be distributing the wrong information. It's important for people to know that you're listening. Connect with people deeply embedded within your community already. Establish ties with influencers to help distribute the correct and helpful information.” -Anastacia Visneski (Gothelf).

I think that if Macy's stood by its whale float, it should have tweeted and posted pictures of the float on social media. It could have mentioned Joan Jett and The Blackhearts and included a clip of the performance from “Kinky Boys.” Instead it did no such thing, and while Macy's upheld its ethics, it looked like Macy's did not fully support the sections of the parade that proved controversial to the public. I truly believe that if the parade is only supposed to be a source of entertainment, there is no reason to not post about the three controversial parts of the parade. I also recommend that Macy's should have released its statements to its social media

accounts, so the public was fully aware of its stance and all media outlets had equal access.

While Macy's lacked full transparency on social media, it performed phenomenally with the wording of its statements. Katherine McLane of Livestrong said "if that's the only answer you give, that's all they can print." (K. McLane, personal communication, Oct. 27, 2013).

Macy's followed this advice and because of this, the media framed news coverage around this. The news coverage discussed all of these issues, but it did not do so in a very negative way. It made the parade seem like a fun and family friendly event that had run into some rough patches with certain organizations.

As mentioned earlier, all social media can be evaluated by online programs to measure its reach and effectiveness. Macy's could see how people were reacting to its statements directly through reading the messages posted on its social media accounts. Since all Macy's did was release statements, it can only monitor news clippings. Monitoring news clippings is a great way to see how any news coverage was framed, but it does not give any idea about what people are saying about the brand. I think it is very important to see what viewers are saying, especially because it may effect Black Friday results at Macy's.

## **Conclusion**

Even though there was a large amount of public outcry about SeaWorld and the parade, Joan Jett and the Blackhearts and South Dakota, and the performance by "Kinky Boots," it is estimated that around 50 million people tuned into watch the parade, while thousands lined the streets to watch. Macy's stock was at its highest for the month of November on the 29<sup>th</sup>, the day after the parade. This means that the parade did not deter people from shopping Macy's Black Friday deals and they were not turned off by the floats. (Google Finance).

I believe that since Macy's did not specifically address any type of political views or discussions, viewers latched onto the idea the parade is put on each year to provide entertainment. Personally, I watch the parade to see the performers and the pretty floats. It has never crossed my mind that the parade could have political messages hidden within a float, and after researching this case I believe the parade stays as far away from politics as possible. Macy's did an excellent job in handling the situations, but I really think it would have been best if the company put all of its statements on its own social media.

Joe Cohen said "Who do you want to be? How do you want to represent yourself? Develop a personal set of ethics to help define your character," and Macy's used its set of ethics to get through the tough criticisms facing its parade. (J. Cohen, personal communication, Oct. 27, 2013). By sticking with the same message and general ethics, Macy's was able to weather through the storm and put on an amazing 87<sup>th</sup> annual Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade. I think this parade will be around for many more lifetimes and it will continue to be successful each year if Macy's keeps up the good work.

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## Social Media Clippings

**Erika Evennou** @eevennou 30 Nov  
 Forever boycotting @Macys, for supporting and allowing @SeaWorld in their parade... Should have acted on your ethics not your profits @peta  
 Retweeted by PETA

**Katie4PETA** @Katie4PETA 29 Nov  
 Awesome 12 year old jumped the barricades to protest @SeaWorld at the #MacysParade @peta gothamist.com/2013/11/28/vid...  
 Retweeted by PETA

**PETA** @peta 3 Dec  
 #MacysParade went on but #RoseParade CAN & SHOULD CANCEL @SeaWorld's float: [peta.vg/roseparade](http://peta.vg/roseparade)  
 RT if u agree! [pic.twitter.com/wXaYQwBvL](http://pic.twitter.com/wXaYQwBvL)



286 RETWEETS 82 FAVORITES

3:16 AM - 3 Dec 13 · Details

Reply to @peta @SeaWorld

**Joan Jett** @joanjett 28 Nov  
 #HappyThanksgiving! If you see Joan Jett and the Blackhearts in the #MacysParade today, share your posts and pictures @JoanJett #Unvarnished

**Kinky Boots** @KinkyBootsBway 28 Nov  
 Thanks for watching us on #MacysParade! Happy Thanksgiving, and don't forget... [pic.twitter.com/8X7aEe6QYk](http://pic.twitter.com/8X7aEe6QYk)  
 Retweeted by Michael Rohrer



**Kinky Boots** @KinkyBootsBway 28 Nov  
 SAY YEAH! if you loved @KinkyBootsBway on the #MacysParade! [pic.twitter.com/14lwjCB4W5](http://pic.twitter.com/14lwjCB4W5)  
 Retweeted by Michael Rohrer



**BOBBY REMIS** @BobbyRemis 29 Nov  
 I am disgusted by the individuals who are "outraged" by @KinkyBootsBway performing in the #MacysParade | [huff.to/18bLJlZ](http://huff.to/18bLJlZ)  
 Followed by MICHAEL DAVIS and 4 others  
 View summary

**#RINO Hunter** @Sleevetalkshow 29 Nov  
 This #Thanksgiving, #MacysParade went too far w/ the trannies of "Kinky Boots." [fb.me/6mWWu1Jh](http://fb.me/6mWWu1Jh)

**radiomadison** @RadioMadison 28 Nov  
 "@Mompreneurmogul: #MacysParade kinky boots NOT appropriate for a family parade thanks for non family values @Macys" Closed minded

**Jordan Roth** @Jordan\_Roth 28 Nov  
 Raising up #Thanksgiving! #KinkyBoots at the #MacysParade! [instagram.com/p/hQ\\_kPAe3y/](http://instagram.com/p/hQ_kPAe3y/) @KinkyBootsBway Broadway

**Jonathan Howe** @Jonathan\_Howe 28 Nov  
 Producers of #KinkyBoots don't want kids at the show then perform during #MacysParade? Makes complete sense. Not. [bit.ly/1uuEfR](http://bit.ly/1uuEfR)