

WEATHERING THE SUPER SIZE ME STORM

Welcome to CCP. My name is Neil McGarry, and I am a graduate student in the Master of Science Program in Professional and Technical Communication at New Jersey Institute of Technology. In this podcast I will discuss corporate advertising for the Corporate Communications Podcast series. This specific podcast, “Weathering a Super-Sized Storm” will analyze the advertising response of McDonald’s Corporation to the documentary “Super Size Me.” This analysis will demonstrate that a company’s advertising campaign should be evaluated both upon its rhetorical impact as well as its business practice.

In 2004, filmmaker Morgan Spurlock released Super Size Me, an independently produced documentary about Spurlock’s 30-day, McDonald’s-only food regimen, aimed at spotlighting the nutritional value (or lack of same) of fast food. The film was made for only \$55,000, but grossed more than \$25 million worldwide and spawned a media nightmare for McDonald’s and the entire fast-food industry.

Paul Argenti, Professor of Corporate Communications at Dartmouth College, states “Reputation is based on the constituency’s perception of the organization rather than the reality of the organization itself.” In this case study, I hope to show that McDonald’s changed relatively little about its basic business methods, but

focused instead on changing the perceptions of its consumers and detractors while preserving its basic profit tactics.

The dietary experiment which Spurlock documents in his film is conducted according to four rules:

1. All of his food must come from McDonald's
2. He must try everything on the McDonald's menu at least once.
3. If asked, he must agree to "super-size" each food order.
4. He must eat three meals a day.

At the beginning of the regimen, Spurlock is certified in good health by three doctors and a nutritionist; by the end, he suffers from headaches, lack of energy, elevated levels of cholesterol and a 25-pound weight gain. The cause of all this, he maintained, was his McDonald's-only food plan.

I think we should take a moment to examine the backdrop against which this documentary appeared. As a national phenomenon, obesity is on the rise; in late 2005, the surgeon general reported that nearly 61% of Americans were overweight, and 27% were obese. This is a trend that has only worsened with time. In the late 1970s, 47% of Americans were characterized as overweight; in 2002, that figure had risen to 65%, including 31% who were clinically obese. Nutrition experts have laid much of the blame for these trends on the shoulders of the high-fat, high-calorie, low-nutritive diets of many Americans.

In this context, Spurlock's documentary was timely and extremely effective. The film relies heavily upon visuals: illustrations of nutritional information and

statistics, pictures of brand-identifying images like Ronald McDonald and the golden arches, and even uses an animated sequence about Chicken McNuggets. Spurlock's fun and informative narrative make Super Size Me accessible both as entertainment and as a source of information.

Not surprisingly, the impact of "Super Size Me" on the fast-food industry was enormous. Before the movie had even opened in theatres, McDonald's was scrambling to assemble a media defense. On the same day as the Hong Kong release of "Super Size Me" the company launched its "Fresh Choices Menu" – which contained offerings like flatbread and salads. In Australia, a series of commercials were aired in which McDonald's CEO Guy Russo stated, "While McDonald's can be part of a healthy lifestyle, everyone's daily regime should include varied, balanced meals as well as exercise." This was accompanied by a "Salads Plus" menu. In the U.K., McDonald's rolled out advertisements that highlighted healthier menu items such as Grilled Chicken Salad and Fruit Bags. In the spring of 2004, the company launched a Healthy Lifestyles Initiative, part of which involved taking out of circulation the ever-popular Super Size Fries.

In addition to menu changes, McDonald's touted its efforts to make its customers better informed about the health impacts of their choices. In October 2005, McDonald's announced that nutritional information would be displayed on its product packaging and tray liners, using easy-to-understand icons and bar charts. McDonald's Canada sponsored an elementary school program, called the Go Active!Fitness Challenge, that focused on encouraging physical activity. The

company highlighted its position as an official sponsor of the Olympics. McDonald's also unleashed a major initiative, complete with tennis champs Venus and Serena Williams and a new mantra: "It's what I eat and what I do and I'm lovin' it."

Finally, the company struck back against negative publicity with pointed reminders of consumer responsibility. In 2005, McDonald's then-newly appointed chief executive, Jim Skinner said, "It's time to shift the focus to personal responsibility. It's not just about our products any more, it's about what our customers do. We want to remind them that leading a balanced, healthy life is important."

Even so, the negative impact of this film was scorching. In October 2005, Datamonitor reported that 28% of U.S. consumers were skeptical of the health claims of food manufacturers; in the U.K., 40% were distrusting. Managing Director of Hong Kong McDonald's Joseph Lau admitted in 2005 that, at parties he attended, Super Size Me came up immediately in conversations.

As you can see, McDonald's media efforts focused on social responsibility and corporate advertising and advocacy, but the facts show that the company's efforts were not strongly connected to the company's actual strategy. At the same time the company promoted healthy eating and balanced lifestyles, it swelled its coffers by introducing of menus featuring even more calorie-dense food for lower prices. The Dollar Menu, whose offerings – surprise, surprise – all cost \$1, increased McDonald's revenue at some stores by 33%. In early 2006, the company unveiled the Bigger Big Mac, which lived up to its name by being 40% larger than its predecessor. As might

be expected, McDonald's salad sales declined, dropping from 14 million salads in 2003 to 9 million in 2006. Even the healthier offerings were designed with a fast-food sensibility; a single packet the caramel sauce for Apple Dippers contained one-quarter of the daily recommended limit of sugar.

Significantly, the company marketed its less-healthy products directly to the ethnic and demographic groups most likely to be harmed by them. In 2006, the New York Times reported that McDonald's got 17 to 18 percent of its sales from black and Hispanic customers. The company did not dispute it. Steve Levigne, vice president for McDonald's United States business research, said "The Dollar Menu appeals to lower-income, ethnic consumers." In the same month, The Journal of the American Medical Association reported that 45 percent of non-Hispanic blacks and 36 percent of Mexican-Americans aged 20 and over are obese, compared to 30 percent of non-Hispanic white adults.

This combination of an increasingly unhealthy menu and a willingness to market directly to at-risk groups paints a picture of a company more concerned with profit growth than with corporate responsibility.

The key issue here is that a corporation can preserve its reputation when the facts and even its own behavior are out of step with its communications strategy. McDonald's highlighted both its attempts to address consumer concerns and its socially responsible support of various philanthropic causes while pursuing precisely the same business strategy that had brought on the Super Size Me storm.

McDonald's has kept its sales strong and profits high despite the damage inflicted by Morgan Spurlock's scathing documentary, mainly because consumers maintained their purchasing habits regardless of their questionable nature of the company's products. Basically, the organization's communications strategy was unnecessary in light of consumer practices. McDonald's customers might have been disturbed by the negative assertions of Super Size Me, but they weren't willing to change their purchasing habits enough to force the company away from marketing and selling demonstrably unhealthy menu items. In essence, McDonald's faced a crisis of communication of image, to which it responded with a great deal of rhetorical flourish, but very little of in terms of business practice.

Once again, this is Neil McGarry. You have just heard a Corporate Communications Podcast entitled "Weathering a Super-Sized Storm." Thanks for listening.

Podcast Title: Weathering a Super-Sized Storm

Synopsis: An analysis of the advertising response of McDonald's Corporation to the documentary "Super Size Me", demonstrating that a company's advertising campaign should be evaluated both upon its rhetorical impact as well as its business practice.

Learning Objectives: A corporation can preserve its reputation when the facts and even its own behavior are out of step with its communications strategy.