

Taylor Renée Horne

Professor Russel Mack

Case Studies

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Oh Polly Giveaway: A Case Study

Overview & Context

The pandemic has thrown a wrench into the daily routines, habits, and lifestyles of many people around the world. One such change in consumer behavior is the stark rise in e-commerce purchasing habits. It's very ordinary nowadays for online retailers to not have any physical stores, in an effort to reduce viral transmission and increase contactless efforts. Overall, much has changed in a short amount of time.

One of these changes is the fact that e-commerce businesses are becoming increasingly popular, thanks to the spike in online engagement on platforms such as the recently popular social media, TikTok. Many speculate that the rapidly evolving trends on TikTok carry over to the fast turnover rate of clothing trends. This is making cheaply-produced clothing all the more attractive, such as that offered by Shein, Romwe, and Fashion Nova, among other recently popular fast-fashion online retailers. In March of 2020, right at the start of the pandemic, another e-commerce women's clothing retailer, dubbed Boohoo, reported a 45% increase in revenue. This kind of clothing is becoming a more appealing alternative to luxury and other fashion items, of which U.S. consumers reported a 27% drop in purchasing habits that same month (Meyer).

Beyond the changes in economic conditions, the world operates much differently now than it did then. Essential workers, such as grocery store clerks, travel personnel, security, and especially medical professionals have and currently are taking risks to keep society provided for.

History

Enter Oh Polly, an online boutique for women founded in 2014 by Claire Henderson and Mike Branney. Originally from Glasgow, Scotland, they currently have three other headquarters, based in Bromborough, England; London, and Los Angeles. They also have offices in Liverpool, Dhaka, and Guangzhou, employing about 500 employees globally. They have a market spanning “almost every country” in the world and have a combined following of over 5 million across all of their brand’s social media accounts, including their activewear line Bo+Tee, founded in 2020; and Neena Swim, founded in 2021 (LinkedIn). They are among the fastest-growing retail brands in the UK, as they were the 5th most engaged brand on social media in 2019 (Oh Polly).

Evidently, they are a relatively new brand that has experienced rapid growth, as many online retailers have in the last few years. In 2020, they collected \$47.56 million in annual sales (Dun & Bradstreet). Their marketing efforts are exclusively dedicated to social media, which aids in cultivating a younger target audience. Due to their strong social media presence – primarily via Facebook and Instagram – they are subject to much talk in the online fashion community via word-of-mouth communication.

Their beginnings emerged from the founders’ storefront on eBay in an effort to fund their charity, the Brannerson Foundation (Oh Polly). This foundational charity supports children’s education in one of the poorest regions of Cambodia, Siem Raep, donating roughly 10% of profits annually (GrowJo).

In addition, they design all of their clothing in-house and minimize outsourcing their labor by owning over half of the factories that produce their products and having a responsibility contract with the other half. This is a stark contrast to many of their competitors, as critics say that outsourced fast-fashion retailers have massive ethical and environmental implications. On

their website, they have an entire “environmental manifesto” explaining actions they currently are taking and goals they intend to accomplish in the future in order to address the company’s impact on pollution in the clothing industry. They even encourage customers to resell their clothing on Depop, an online thrifting reseller, when they’re done with their garments.

Aside from the surprising inaccessibility of their “About Us” page, Oh Polly generally makes a decent effort on its website to exhibit its ethical and economic responsibility in the industry it’s a part of, with Dun & Bradstreet ranking them a 1 out of 5 on their ESG – environmental, social, governance – scale.


WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Initially, Claire Henderson and Mike Branney, the owners of Oh Polly, started selling on eBay. They were looking for ways to fund their charity in Cambodia, known as The BrannersonFoundation. Their sales on eBay really took off so from there they set up a social media account and soon after, a website.

The company grew at a fast pace but it wasn't all smooth sailing. One of the first suppliers that Claire and Mike trusted stole £30,000 of their money, which at that time was all of their money! However, in their own words, “the key is not to quit, every successful person hasn't quit.”

If you want to find out more, and listen to Claire and Mike answering your questions about Oh Polly, starting a business and general tips and tricks then head over to our Youtube video.

WATCH NOW



SWOT Analysis

Going off the history and values of the company, there is much that sets Oh Polly apart from its competitors.

As far as strengths go, they are one of the few popular online boutiques to be making an active effort toward its environmental impact. In addition, they take on additional ethical responsibility towards their employees, specifically their garment producers, to make sure they’re treated well. It even has specific charity efforts that motivated the company’s inception. Compared to competitors, it's a relatively small company, and small companies have actually

increased in not only volume but also sales since the increasing efforts to support them at the start of the pandemic.

Weaknesses include their lack of a global audience. Much of their traffic comes from the U.K. specifically and has little against globally popular companies, such as Shein. Their clothing also caters to a very specific aesthetic, as much of the clothing is very nightlife-esque and shows a lot of skin. Their products are all similar in nature in regards to cuts and colors, with not much exploration of patterns or silhouettes besides that of the natural body. Not only is it an issue that the company's products can't sell to a modest audience, but the website doesn't show much physical or ethnic diversity either.

Opportunities can be pursued by resolving the aforementioned weaknesses. The company's marketing efforts could be tweaked to appeal to a more diverse audience by diversifying its models and adding products that appeal to more modest cultural standards. It doesn't exactly broadcast itself as a small business either – and while \$50 million in revenue a year with offices around the world may not exactly merit that, the company does have humble, endearing beginnings that could be communicated better. The company's "About Us" website was surprisingly difficult to find, and this means that many are missing out on properly communicating the information regarding its environmental and ethical efforts as well.

Threats include global fast-fashion retailers; Shein and Fashion Nova are the bigger ones that come to mind. These brands sell very similar clothing to a very similar demographic of 18-25 aged women, and their products sell exceedingly well, due to their impeccably low prices. There is much controversy around their ethical labor practices, however, which is the reason behind their low prices – something that Oh Polly could easily take advantage of. In comparison

to the vast majority of the industry, Oh Polly prioritizes social and moral obligations to a larger extent than its competitors.

Human Factors

Oh Polly's executive team is relatively small; they have no evident crisis management or public relations team, as far as optics go. Consistent with this, the company has been involved in multiple controversies. Little information about its marketing team and strategies is available due to the company being private. The extent of its marketing efforts' publicity is extended to the spokespeople running its social media pages, as they are the media channels that have the most investment as far as advertising goes.

One example of the company's lack of consumer-centric marketing is that of the "Oh Polly Inclusive" (@ohpollyinclusive) Instagram page that was subject to much criticism, featuring women of color and body diversity in its feed – separate from its main Instagram, which exclusively featured skinny white women models (Onibada). Lapses in consumer optics regarding the company's marketing effort considerations will be further discussed in this case study.

Timeline

The context of the time period in which this case occurred is mostly accounted for by the conditions of the pandemic. Many people were afraid of continuing their ordinary lives as they were before because of the new threat that so little was known about. Essential workers, particularly medical professionals, were being venerated as heroes since they were the ones continuing their work, even in light of the potential danger that they faced, just to keep the world going around.

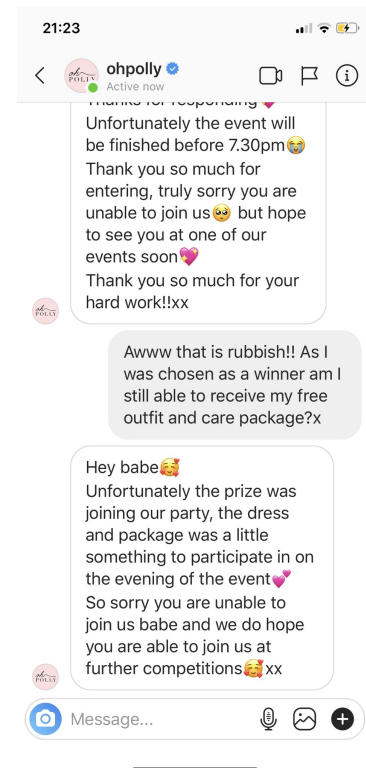
Oh Polly experienced a spike in sales, like many other online retailers, as in-person shopping was no longer available as an option. In the spring of 2020, they utilized this newfound publicity by holding a sweepstakes competition targeted toward healthcare workers to honor their work on the front line (Morgan).

On April 21st, 2020 at 9:06 PM, 20-year-old student nurse Lara Harper from Glasgow, Scotland was drawn as an award recipient. Her award included a care package with a new outfit to join in on a virtual cocktail party taking place on April 24th. She was notified of her prize via Instagram direct messaging.

Unfortunately, she was scheduled to work a 12-hour shift that day until 7:30 PM when the party took place at 4:00 PM. When she

informed the company of this, the spokesperson running the official Instagram that sent the initial DM told Harper that her award was rescinded. When she asked if she still received her care package prize, the company responded by saying that “the prize was winning the party, the dress and package was a little something

to participate in on the night of the event.” It followed by apologizing and expressing hope that she was able to participate in future competitions (Twitter).



Harper took to Twitter to tweet about what had happened the following day at 3:38 PM: “Imagine entering an @ohpolly comp for NHS WORKERS and winning but can’t participate due to working a 12 hr shift on the FRONTLINE and then being told you can’t claim the care

package and outfit because you're unable to be on the video call." The tweet went viral, racking up 14,000 likes almost instantly and outraging many users on social media. They pointed out the irony in trying to support healthcare workers and then retracting the support because their work got in the way. One user, @MissRacheWhite, tweeted: "We're grateful for [your] hard work Lara but if you can't meet [our] advertising plug we'd rather pick someone else' wow." A competitor, Pretty Little Thing, also responded to Harper's tweet and offered her a free parcel in



compensation because she "deserved it." Many users that tweeted in response argued that the competition was with greedy intentions by requiring online attendance as a term of receiving the prize, promoting themselves by filming recipients' reactions of gratitude (Twitter).

Oh Polly responded to Harper's tweet directly via its own official Twitter account less than two hours later via a thread of three tweets. The spokesperson on the other end said that there was a "logistical mix-up" regarding the terms of the competition and the event, and conceded to give her, along with the other recipients, the full award that was agreed upon regardless of their ability to participate (Twitter).

Despite this compensation, Harper had already decided that she won't be shopping from Oh Polly again due to the debacle (Haynes). She wasn't the only one, either; many people who saw her tweet had made similar decisions, with user @xcharliekrayx responding "Eewww will never shop at oh Polly again after [seeing] this shame on them !" (Twitter).

Stakeholders

There aren't too many stakeholders, or "actors," in this case. They are listed as follows:

- Oh Polly
 - Social media (specifically Twitter & Instagram) spokespeople
- Lara Harper
- NHS / EMS workers
- General public, represented via Twitter users
- Pretty Little Thing

Since it is a private company, there are no investors to be concerned with here; however, there is a reputation to maintain.

Practitioner Factors

There isn't much evidence of a public relations executive or team at all. The response time seemed very rushed and the response itself not thought through. That being said, this was a case that had to move quickly. The exchange occurred on April 21st, and the virtual cocktail party was held on April 24th, a mere three days later. According to the DM conversation, the package was intended as part of the event itself, so it needed to be delivered by the time of the event.

Not much communication skill was executed here. The company had been in hot water prior, but despite this first-hand experience of how necessary crisis communication can be, it didn't execute this knowledge any better than it did before.

As its marketing methods are exclusively social media, it only utilizes its owned platforms of media via directly responding to Harper as its primary, and only, method of

remediation. The company's voice has little more power or influence than that of the other users'. No available news releases, paid advertising, or other platforms could be used to elevate their position, aside from the media earned by generally-negative news coverage.

Oh Polly had already been on thin ice since the Oh Polly Inclusive controversy, and those who had seen the incident's events unravel already had an idea of their poor judgment when they launched an exclusive "inclusivity" Instagram account.

Similarly, the brand's integrity was quite transparent here, as users on Twitter were able to figure out pretty quickly that Oh Polly only wanted to hand out free products if they could tell the world what a good thing the company was doing, and rescinding the product as soon as the recipient doesn't benefit the company's promotional needs. Competitions like these are often promoted by including reposts and likes of the competition announcement post as part of the entry requirements. If anything, this is a twist of irony; a competition that was supposed to bring good promotion and optics around the company's brand ended up demonstrating its true intentions and went against its own favor.

However, other brands were quite quick to jump on the opportunity to capitalize on Oh Polly's decline. Pretty Little Thing is a top UK online fashion retail competitor, and revered Harper for her work as a medical worker by offering a care package as well, outside of any competition conditions, right in the original Twitter thread.

A. W. Page Principles

Tell the truth: Not executed. The conditions of the prize were that an NHS worker would receive a care package, including an outfit, and this was not initially followed; rather, it had to be corrected after they were put on blast.

Prove it with action: Executed. While they originally withdrew her reward, they did get it to her after being boxed into a corner to do so to save the brand's already-dwindling reputation.

Listen to stakeholders: Executed. While this was prompted by giving in to what the infuriated public wanted after seeing the audacity of Oh Polly first-hand, they did concede to what the public's discretion deemed as the right thing to do after being told what that was.

Manage for tomorrow: Not executed. They had a large controversy not one year before this one, and the company's executives learned little from it. According to search engine results with the keywords "oh" + "polly," there are still controversies that have gone largely unaddressed by the company, likely due to their inability to in the absence of proper communication platforms and crisis management plans.

Realize an enterprise's true character is expressed by its people: Not executed. The nature and interest of the company were exposed to be quite the contrast of what it had communicated. The Instagram social media spokesperson's action of rescinding the award offer spoke volumes more than the actual nature of the competition to reward essential workers.

Remain calm, patient, and good-humored: Not executed. Everything was too impulsive, from the immediate withdrawal of the reward to the explanation of why the company did that to begin with. While it wasn't temperamental with its responses, it was reckless and disingenuous, which stakeholders saw immediately as a cover-up. It didn't answer any questions or clarify anything besides fulfilling the original promise it made after it'd been coerced into doing so.

Takeaway

Oh Polly needs a crisis communication strategy with a team to enforce it, pronto. Poor public relations killed this company twice in the span of a year, and it didn't properly recover from either instance. The company continues to have negative news coverage from unreasonable

wardrobe malfunctions to design plagiarism, to name a few. However, nowhere is the company renowned for its charity efforts that were mentioned earlier in this case study. Its marketing efforts are purely attempting to drive more promotion to get more traffic to the website in order to increase sales, cut and dry. It's a standard, profitable model, but for a company that was founded to fund a charity, it isn't sustainable and doesn't consider the ethical implications that many consumers consider when practicing brand loyalty at all. With an industry as ever-evolving as fashion – especially nowadays – it's absolutely essential to be prepared for the unpredictability of such crises, as shown with this brand alone. The best solution is to invest in at least one public relations director to oversee new campaigns and initiatives. Both the competition and the inclusivity page controversy could've been avoided with this evaluation resource set in place to screen for potential issues.

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