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Do onto others what you would like to be done onto you

The Firestone tire recall that took place in 2000 is one of the most controversial and ethical issues in business and public relations. Firestone Tire Co. was aware of their tire issue and did not recall their tires until over one hundred deaths and hundreds of car accidents. According to Kant’s Categorical Imperative Firestone did not act in a way that would be a universal law and they used their customers as a means only.

According to Robert Moll, “In 1997 and 1998, the Ford Motor Company began receiving reports from Saudi Arabia, Venezuela and Malaysia about accidents involving the Explorer, Ford's popular sport utility vehicle (SUV). Firestone tires mounted on the vehicles were blowing out or experiencing tread separations that led to violent accidents, vehicle rollovers, injuries and some fatalities.” (Moll) Firestone told Ford that the tire problems were because of driving conditions, lack of maintenance and underinflated tires. Firestone did not admit that their tires had a problem and yet blamed it on Ford. Nonetheless, Firestone agreed to replace all the tires on Fords Explorers’ over seas. The benefit that Firestone had in this situation was that Firestone could replace the tires abroad without having to make a claim, replace or recall any tires in America. This allocated time for Firestone to figure out their possible problems and to avoid issues with the American publics and regulations.

Years after, complaints of the Firestone tires had started to surface in parts of the US. Firestone assured its customers and the US National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) that the problem was not their tires but people need to maintain their tires better and monitor the pressure. “To minimize the potential for more accidents, both Firestone and Ford urge all consumers to keep their tires properly inflated, according to either the owner's manual or the tire placard located somewhere on the vehicle.” (Juran) The NHTSA started to notice an accumulation of reports about Firestone tires and Ford Explorers. There were multiple fatalities involving Firestone tires and this is when the investigation began on 47 million defect tires and the recall.

The public relation practitioners working for Firestone were dealing with each situation as it came and not looking at the problem as a whole. By doing this they were not valuing the lives of their customers. Firestone ignored the warning signs over seas and then only dealt with the situations in America when it was threatening their business. This is not the ethical way for PR practitioners to handle a crisis situation.

The best way for the PR practitioners at Firestone to have handled this unethical situation was to follow Kant’s Categorical Imperatives. If Firestone acted only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that should become a universal law, then Firestone would have handled the situation promptly and efficiently. What Firestone PR practitioners should have done was thought through the ethical impropriates of their situation and notify the public immediately of their mistakes. By Firestone not communicating this to the public and employees they did not respect anyone but their own reputation. Firestone allowed for their employees and people around the world to drive on their tires knowing that they could potentially burst and cause physical harm. According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Kant defines virtue as “the moral strength of a human being’s will in fulfilling his duty.” (Johnson) If the PR practitioners at Firestone were aware of the Ford/Firestone tire issue and believed in Kant’s Categorical Imperative then they would have felt the need to fulfill their will and prove their moral strength by telling the public as soon as the issue arose. All of the PR practitioners should have felt that it was their duty to inform the public and the NHTSA. Unfortunately, because Firestone did not act right away and in accordance with this theory, Firestone lost credibility and ultimately the company failed.

If the Firestone PR practitioners followed the cardinal virtues, justice, prudence, temperance and courage then they wouldn’t have had this ethical problem. Firestone tire recall went against three of the four cardinal virtues, justice, prudence and courage. The PR practitioners were not fair to the public in handling the case and did not maintain the importance of justice and equality. They also did not make good and practical judgment in realizing that it was necessary and life threatening to tell the public. The last virtue that was not implemented was courage, the PR practitioners lacked bravery and stance on dangerous ethical issues that needed to be handled. By following Kant’s Categorical Imperative as well as upholding the cardinal virtues, the PR practitioners would have solved this case ethically, quicker and with fewer consequences.

Firestone did not treat humanity as an end but as a means only. They manipulated, lied and cheated and thus lost their respect from customers and employees. According to Kant, we must not manipulate others, which implies treating others as a mere means to our ends rather than an ends in themselves. By Firestone PR neglecting to inform the public about their tire issues over seas they manipulated and lied to the public. Firestone was aware of the issues they were having with their tires and did not want to admit to America that they had known about their tire problems. If Firestone had followed Kant’s Categorical Imperative then Firestone would have never used the public as a means only but rather treated them with respect.

Respecting the public, customers and employees of Firestone would have benefit Firestone. According to Kant always respect the rationality of other people because if you deceive other people you disrespect their rationality and therefore you ought to never to deceive others. This holds true in the Firestone recall. Being that all humans are capable of having good reason and being responsible for our own conduct, the PR practitioners at Firestone had a duty, according to their good reason. Firestone PR practitioners should have respected the rationality of their customers and the general public and notified them of the issues that had and could occur. By Firestone ignoring and deceiving their customers they went again Kant’s logic.

Many companies, like Firestone, recall products. The difference is that most companies recall the product as soon as there are just a few reports of issues. Starbucks, for example, recalled over 250,000 children’s plastic cups throughout US and Canada. Starbucks recalled the cups after seven reports of the cups breaking and causing harm to children. Starbucks notified the public about the immediate action they needed to take to avoid any more cases. “Parents and caregivers should stop young children from using these cups immediately, and return the cups to any Starbucks location for a refund and a free beverage of any size.” (Starbucks Corp.) Starbucks solved their product malfunction ethically and properly. They immediately acted on the issues that were present. Firestone however waited to recall their tires until over one hundred cases verses the only seven Starbuck children plastic cup reports. Starbucks is a good example of a recall situation that supports Kant’s Categorical Imperatives.

According to the book The Elements of Moral Philosophy by James Rachels, “Kant said the value of human beings is above all price.” This signifies the importance of humanity and dignity humans have. Humans deserve respect and have more value then just “things.” A PR practitioner that follows Kant’s Categorical Imperatives with the belief that humans cannot be used as a means only, ultimately give respect to humanity. Kant believes that humans have goals and objectives in which we find things that we use and have value for us but are just things and are non-human. These things we use as a means only to get give us something that we need. However, Kant believes we must not use people in this way. Kant believes that, “the only way that moral goodness can exist is for rational creatures to act from a good will- that is, to apprehend what they should do and to do it from a sense of duty.” (Rachels) With this theory the PR practitioners for Firestone should have acted in their goodwill and moral duty with respect to their customers and notified them of the tire mishaps.

The counterargument to the reasons why Kant’s Categorical Imperative would have not been the best theory to solve this ethical impropriety would be that Firestone could have notified the public too soon and lost all credibility for a tire issue that wasn’t serious. If Firestone PR practitioners send out a news release right away about the issues they were having over seas, Firestone probably would have lost a lot of business right away. Firestone would have risked a decline in sales, rumors and a bad reputation. If Firestone had sent out the news release and the tire issue turned out to not be a serious situation then it would have had a horrible impact on Firestones business.

However if Firestone took the risk and notified the public right away Firestone would have saved a few hundred lives as well as avoided the unethical reputation they now have.

The PR practitioners of Firestone chose an unethical way to deal with the life threatening tire issue. Firestone PR practitioners should have followed Kant’s Categorical Imperatives and notified the public sooner. If Firestone was concerned about the humanity of their customers and felt the need to respect them, then Firestone would have recalled the tires sooner. Because Firestone knew their tires were faulty and waited until over one hundred deaths and hundreds of accidents to recall their tires, they deceived the public, lied and ultimately proved that they used their customers as a means only.

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