

Edelman Case Analysis

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CCOM 4700

15 December 2022

Introduction

What happens when a renowned international marketing firm's commitment to critical global issues such as climate control stands in contrast to some of its clients? For this third case analysis, I have selected two pieces of organizational rhetoric from Edelman that encompass the company's response on the issue of climate change and the backlash it received in 2021 for partnering with a fossil fuel company. Moreover, the artifacts that will be analyzed are located on Edelman's website: "Climate Change: Our Way Forward" and "Today's Climate Update." The rhetoric from both pieces demonstrates the organization's urgency and dedication to providing a better future for not only Edelman but the entire world. The purpose of this case analysis is to evaluate the effectiveness of these two pieces of rhetoric in accomplishing the organization's goals. Structurally, this essay will provide an overview of the situation, theoretical framework, method of analysis, findings/interpretation, and evaluation of the rhetoric.

Theory and Concepts

These two artifacts are centered on the theory of issues management, a theory related to an organization responding to or resolving an issue. Moreover, organizations must identify and record issues, determine the impact and prioritize issues, and create and follow a plan to resolve the issue while implementing strategies. Edelman has been internationally recognized for its public relations consultancy firm, partnering with various businesses to promote and protect their brands for years. The agency has consistently been a strong advocate for creating working for a greener environment, pledging to always work with an "environmental conscience." However, in 2021, Edelman was paid \$4 million to promote ExxonMobil, one of the country's most extreme fossil fuel trade groups. The agency's failure to honor its pledge resulted in a loss of trust from its

enabling and functional audiences. These audiences are equally as vital since they include clients and employees as enabling audiences, and investors and shareholders as functional audiences.

Within issues management, four cycles are determined by which groups are interested in the issue itself. While Richard Edelman and his marketing firm have established an environmentally conscious public display, they failed to meet any of the standards promoted by the issues management. This failure has caused a problem in the "potential status stage" or the problematic stage, putting their enabling and functional audiences at risk of losing their trust in the agency. As Edelman addresses "issues in the potential stage, it must then consider the types of appeals that may be useful in addressing the issue as it continues to develop" (Hoffman and Ford, 2013). This step is crucial in decision-making because it can heavily impact the success of the organization's goals and future relationship with its audiences. Going through the lens of Issue Management will take us through the process of Edelman's attempt to recover trust.

Overview and Method of Investigation

This paper will conduct a rhetorical analysis of two artifacts from Edelman, employing an evaluative approach. This technique will assess the rhetoric's capacity and efficacy in achieving its objectives as an organization. Both pieces of rhetoric were generated in response to an issues management situation. Artifact 1, titled "Climate Change: Our Way Forward," is the initial statement from Edelman in November 2021. In response to the backlash from partnering with ExxonMobil, this text was presented by CEO Richard Edelman and global climate chair Robert Casamento at the town hall and webpage. The remarks strive to advance climate action as an agency while simultaneously upholding its values. In January 2021, two months after their initial announcement, Casamento and Edelman (CEO) released Artifact 2, titled "Today's Climate Update," as a follow-up statement to update the public and Edelman's clients on the steps they

had taken since the initial statement. This text was designed to persuade their employees, clients, and other audiences that Edelman is a company that has taken two substantive steps to lead, is committed to continuous improvement and is motivated to achieve its goals. This paper argues that, based on our knowledge of the situation and rhetorical strategies, these pieces of rhetoric are successful.

RHETORICAL STRATEGIES: Values Advocacy

The main rhetorical strategies found throughout both pieces of rhetoric are within the sector of pathos. Pathos is a crucial rhetorical strategy employed by Richard Edelman in both pieces of rhetoric; this tactic allows rhetors to appeal to audiences' emotions or beliefs. Value appeals in organizational rhetoric can be identified "as statements to demonstrate that the values of the organization align with the values of the audience or society in general" (Hoffman and Ford, 2013). Edelman appeals to shared values and emotions, such as family, to connect with the audience and elicit an emotional response. For example, Richard Edelman opens artifact #1 by saying, "as a leader of a family business, I have been reflecting deeply..." This statement emphasizes family values, creating a feeling of togetherness and solidarity and giving the message a more personal touch.

In addition to family values, the rhetoric appeals to organizational values. Throughout both pieces, Edelman makes a call to action on how, as an organization, it can improve to build a future to work together toward combating the climate emergency. Richard Edelman uses words and phrases such as "urgent," "commitment," "hold ourselves accountable," and "today is the first step" to demonstrate the organizational values of growth, accountability, and teamwork. When he speaks out eight weeks after the initial statement and provides an update on what steps

it has undertaken to improve, it is evident that the organization is committed to action and transformation.

RHETORICAL STRATEGIES: Identification Strategies

Edelman seeks to build identificational strategies in order to develop and maintain its identity and connect with not only their audiences but the general public as well. Identification is a significant part of organizations creating rhetoric, as organizations must provide individuals with reasons to identify through writing. In addition, when humans identify themselves with something, there is typically a solid emotional connection. For instance, Edelman's shareholders and investors want to feel a sense of belonging to the company they chose to associate themselves with. Essentially, people get their "identities in part from the groups they belong to" (Hoffman and Ford, 2013). Organizations must work to build and maintain a strong identification among its employees, investors, and clients.

When analyzing this situation alongside these identification strategies, the common ground technique was a powerful rhetorical strategy. Rhetors use this technique to demonstrate that the "organization has common interests with its audience" (Hoffman and Ford, 2013). Edelman seeks to establish these common interests by highlighting the importance of making a difference in the world. The collective sense of urgency and dedication to a shared goal reinforces the company's values: taking action to protect the environment and combat climate change. Another identification strategy seen throughout both pieces of rhetoric is the assumed or transcendent "we." By using this term, rhetors help the audience feel important and that all members share the views of the organization. Phrases such as "we embrace the opportunity to make a difference," "we must all play a role to be part of this solution," "we must strive to do

more", and "we are going to bring the best of Edelman every day" create a sense of shared responsibility among the people and almost an "institutional identity."

These rhetorical strategies of values advocacy and identification strategies create a sense of personal responsibility and create a connection between the audience and the organization's goals. By making a connection with the audience, the organization is able to create a sense of urgency and inspire people to take action.

Evaluative reading: preferred reading

An evaluative approach to a rhetorical analysis involves both analyzing the situation and strategies, as well as making an argument on "what the rhetor wants the audience to think, feel, or believe" (Hoffman and Ford, 2013). This is known as a preferred reading. Before I performed a preferred reading of my own on this topic, I took into consideration my experience studying Edelman and the biases I may have. For the past three years of my college career, I've had the opportunity to research a wide variety of Public Relations agencies in my classes, but I have always come back to Edelman. Their years of expertise and dedication to promoting and protecting brand identity make them stand out from the rest. Furthermore, their commitment to people, the planet, diversity and more shows they care beyond just the work they do. My research on Edelman culminated in an evaluation of their 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer on climate change, which used statistical data to set the agenda for their future. This evaluative approach to the rhetorical analysis I conducted revealed that Edelman has a passion for change and success, which the rhetor wants their audience to recognize and appreciate. After conducting external research and examining the rhetorical context, it is evident that the organizational objectives of these artifacts of rhetoric are to solidify Edelman's identity and uphold its principles. The rhetor's goal is to make the audience believe that they can be agents of change in

the world. The subsequent statement, issued eight weeks after the initial response, strengthens their values and reinforces their identity, instilling a feeling of collective responsibility. The rhetor's choice of words in both pieces of rhetoric is intended to draw attention and make the audience feel included in the organization.

Using values advocacy and identification strategies are two robust strategies in organizational rhetoric, and Edelman did an exceptional job of implementing these strategically throughout the pieces of rhetoric. By using phrases such as "we," and appealing to both family and organizational values through phrases such as "as a leader of a family business" and "accountability" and "commitment," the audience feels an emotional connection (Edelman, 2021). Although one constraint was that it took a while for the audiences to regain trust with Edelman, listening to their statements with caution having lost trust once before, overall this did not have much effect. Since Edelman retook initiative soon after their initial response, both the enabling and functional audiences, which include employees, investors, stakeholders, and clients positively reacted to these statements given by the CEO and the chairman of global affairs.

An asset to Edelman is the strong reputation and client base it has built already over decades of being one of the top PR firms globally. As stated within the rhetoric, Edelman has a "strong and proud relationship with its clients" (Edelman, 2021). Moreover, as the agency is planning on making changes to create a better environment, Edelman states, "we will support companies that are committed to the Paris Agreement and transparent in reporting their progress in accelerating their transition to net-zero emissions" (Edelman, 2021). The agency must maintain this substantial reputation with its clients, investors, stakeholders and make sure they are committed to zero emissions because it cannot risk losing these audiences and facing deeper issues. Overall, it is evident that the agency is continuously striving for change; this resilience

and determination is proven from the pieces of rhetoric studied, on their website, in addition to the 2022 trust barometer.

Conclusion

The two pieces of rhetoric from Richard Edelman's "Climate Change: Our Way Forward" and "Today's Climate Update" were highly effective for the organization's goals. These values and identification strategies help Edelman create a strong argument by connecting to the audience and the external world's values and interests. By establishing a sense of shared responsibility and common goals, Edelman can make a persuasive argument ethically and appropriately. This rhetoric exhibits the identity Edelman is attempting to construct and preserve simultaneously. Edelman is careful in his choice of words by utilizing values advocacy and identification strategies that resonate with clients, investors, staff, and stakeholders.

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