

Ethics Beyond Factory Farming: An analysis of the Fair Oaks Farm animal abuse crisis

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Abstract

This report analyzes the ethics of Mike McCloskey's response to the Fair Oaks Farms animal abuse video, released by Animal Rescue Mission in June 2019. The report is mainly focused on analyzing his response, but some commentary is provided on other companies' responses as well as the public's reaction to McCloskey's response. It is key to note that this report does not aim to discuss the ethics of factory farming as a whole.

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Executive Summary

This is a report of the Fair Oaks Farms (FOF) alleged animal abuse video released by the Animal Rescue Mission (ARM) in early June 2019. The report focuses on the ethics of founder Mike McCloskey's response to the crisis that was released after the video surfaced. There are several parts included in the report. First, a brief overview of the situation itself is provided. Next, a rationale for why the author selected this topic is provided.

A brief literature review of relevant ethical theories is also provided. These theories are the foundation of the analysis the author conducted on McCloskey's response. Next, a method section is included, detailing how the author found, selected, and analyzed the information utilized in the report. Then, a results section is included, objectively explaining the findings of the analyses conducted on McCloskey's response. This section also includes some analyses from other companies' responses that use FOF as a supplier, as well as an analysis of the comments on the Facebook post on which McCloskey's statement was originally posted.

Last, the report includes some recommendations for how the situation could have been better handled. Additionally, it includes the author's thoughts on the overall ethics of the response, as well as a brief discussion on the public's reaction to McCloskey's response to the video. It is important to note that the ethics of factory farming is beyond the scope of this report and is, therefore, not discussed.

Situation Analysis

On June 4, 2019 a non-profit animal rights activist group, Animal Rescue Mission (ARM), released an extremely graphic video showing FOF employees severely abusing cows on the farm, particularly calves (O'Kane, 2019). The video almost immediately went viral and caused intense public outcry for boycotts against FOF and any company that continued to use the

farm as a supplier. Following the video's release, the founder of the farm, Mike McCloskey, released a rather lengthy statement expressing that he is "disgusted by and take[s] full responsibility for the actions seen in the footage" (Ober, 2019).

Reasoning for Researching this Situation

I chose to research this situation because I am passionate about animal rights and protecting the animals that provide us with essential products, like milk and cheese. Aside from that, I also selected this situation because this is one instance where I feel that the company's response was adequate, yet the public refused to receive the explanation and apology. This is a rare phenomenon and is interesting to research. In my experience, if the public is still angry about a situation, it is usually because the company did not adequately respond to the issue. But this time, I really feel that the public was unwilling to receive any apology or explanation, even if it was well crafted and planned.

Literature Review

Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2006) explain that beginning in the 1990s, the push for corporate openness and transparency has grown tremendously. The public sees transparency as a deterrent against unethical behavior, so companies that are transparent more easily gain the public's trust and improve their own reputation (Fitzpatrick and Bronstein, 2006). Transparency further carries a level of accountability from the organization to the public. Trust is built between the public and company when the public's expectations are consistently met and is broken when such expectations are violated. When trust between the public and a company has been violated, the company must tell the truth about the situation. Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2006) describe truth as "the whole story...with all its innumerable justifications, explanations and excuses." It is critical that a statement aimed to rebuild trust does not mislead or misrepresent the truth.

Additionally, Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2006) identify four motivators people use to

decide if an issue is salient or not: safety, fairness, equality, and aesthetics. People not only apply these motivators to themselves, but also to others, and expect them to be upheld for everyone. Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2006) explain that this is why health, safety, and environmental issues remain at the forefront of public discussion and attention. These issues are salient to many people and when expectations are violated from one of those categories, it can make an issue a much bigger deal than the company might have initially anticipated.

Last, Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2006) discuss the difference between responsibility and accountability, but how they interact with each other. Responsibility is taking or placing blame where it is due (Fitzpatrick, 2006). For example, if an employee at FOF harms a cow, that employee is directly responsible. Accountability is taking appropriate action against a responsible party. Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2006) further explain that accountability does not always happen and that it can be a grey area, as who or what is actually responsible for something might be difficult to determine. Nonetheless, companies are expected to express both when dealing with high profile crises.

Method

I first conducted a Google search to find the original video ARM posted again. I needed to watch the video again to understand the full context of the situation. A secondary video was also released by ARM a few days after the first one. I also searched and watched this video. Once I had re-watched both videos with a critical eye, I searched for news articles that laid out the timeline of the situation and reported the facts of what actually happened. I needed this as the foundation of this report, so that I knew what happened and when.

Next, I searched for FOF's response to the crisis. A blogger hyperlinked McCloskey's Facebook post to the blog post, making it easier to find. It was critical that I find FOF's response since the main focus of the report is on the ethics of the company's response to the crisis. Next, I

searched for responses from other companies that use FOF as a supplier. I found the local news' website from the FOF area that had nicely compiled those companies' responses. I needed this information to analyze the ethics of their own responses, since, again, this report focuses on the ethics of the responses. Any theories used were found through the textbook for this course and through the knowledge received in the class.

Once I had gathered all my information, I conducted an analysis of FOF's response to the crisis and a brief analysis of the other companies' responses. To analyze FOF's response, I read McCloskey's statement several times, looking for different ethical aspects each time. First, I looked for any remorse in the statement. Next, I looked for an explanation for the abuse shown in the video. Then, I looked for concrete plans for an investigation and consequences for anything that investigation turned up. Last, I read the comments on the Facebook post to understand how the public reacted to the statement.

Not all of these steps were necessary to analyze the other companies' responses. For the third-party responses, I primarily looked for how they would continue business with FOF at this time. There is no need for those companies to apologize or explain themselves, as they were not directly involved in any way.

Results

McCloskey's response is detailed, explaining that FOF was actually made aware that ARM had gone undercover on their farms several months prior to the video that was released to the public was taken. He further acknowledged that there was some abuse was discovered at that time and action had been taken against those employees (Ober, 2019).

In fact, three of the employees featured in the video had already been terminated from the company by the time the video surfaced because other co-workers had followed FOF's "see something, say something" policy and reported abuse to management (Ober, 2019). Following

this line of reasoning, McCloskey went on to express his concerns about ARM itself, saying that for ARM to have video footage of this, hold the video for months, and then release it to the public instead of showing management was “concerning” (Ober, 2019). As a result of those concerns, he reached out to ARM’s founder to suggest a better way to handle these situations that protected both companies.

Last, McCloskey addressed accusations that FOF was growing marijuana on the property and stated that the plant in question is a common plant on Midwest farms, but that he was unhappy to hear that employees were using drugs while on the clock. From here, he moved on to talk about his disappointment as a veterinarian that animals had been abused in this way and it was not caught sooner.

The response included remorse and aggravation at the situation. McCloskey took responsibility for the situation personally and expressed his disappointment that this occurred on his farms. The response primarily, though, focused on the investigation and the consequences individuals involved would face. The explanation for the abuse appeared lacking at first, but upon another critical read, it was clear that the explanation was there, but that the company really did not have a good explanation for why it happened. The explanation was, essentially, that a few bad employees chose to do this on their own accord, despite extensive training through the company. Nonetheless, training would be improved to further reduce the likelihood of this happening again. The response concluded with contact information so that people who still had questions or concerns could reach out for further clarification.

The other companies’ responses, including Coca-Cola and the Newton County Sheriff’s Office, primarily focused on FOF’s decision to suspend all dairy product shipment from the location in the video until the investigation was completed. The Sheriff’s Office explained that it was working with FOF to bring legal justice to anyone involved and further urged the public to

report animal abuse directly to the office if anyone ever saw anything. Coca-Cola backed FOF's strong response to the situation and supported the suspension of products from that location. It further assured the public that FOF was being transparent not only with the public, but also with their company about the investigation results, and that Coca-Cola was willing to help in any way it could.

The comments on the Facebook post with McCloskey's response were overwhelmingly negative. Most people were angry that his response did not address accusations that FOF sold its calves to the veal industry. Due to the outrage over this lacking address, McCloskey released a statement in the comments of the original statement saying the following:

) **Fair Oaks Farms** A message from Mike McCloskey
"In regards to my comment on not sending our calves to veal- it was not our practice in the past, but due to a lack of communication between the general manager in charge of livestock sales and myself, I was unaware that we were selling our calves to the veal industry and apologize for the unintended false claim made previously. As of yesterday, our bull calves will no longer go to veal."

Like · Reply · 8w



Other people simply expressed that they did not believe McCloskey's explanation. Others expressed that no matter what was said, it did not fix the problem and they would never support a farm that allowed abuse to happen at all. There were some who thanked McCloskey for his transparency and honesty, but those people were quickly attacked by others with a more negative view of the response.

Recommendations

McCloskey's response is one of the better responses I have read from a company struggling with this severe of a crisis. He professionally and respectfully explained that actions had previously been taken against some employees featured in the video and that more would be

taken against the others, demonstrating both responsibility and accountability. This was important because if it had come out later that FOF knew about the abuse and had done nothing, or at least not said anything about that, it would have come back on them and appeared dishonest. He did a good job of not sounding like he was passing blame, just explaining what happened.

There are a couple things I would have done differently in this response, though, that might have made it more effective. I would have included a bit more emotion. While the facts in the response were absolutely necessary, it could have come across a bit robotically to some people who were less concerned about what was going to happen to the employees, and more concerned about animal welfare. McCloskey needed to appeal to the emotional side a bit more.

Additionally, I would have directly confronted the accusation about selling calves to the veal industry. Clearly, that was a topic of great importance to many people, yet it was not addressed. I believe it was not addressed because the explanation for that was weak, evidenced in the lack luster response pictured above. FOF should have found a way to craft a better response to that particular accusation than the afterthought response buried deep in the comments on the post.

I think a better way McCloskey could have accomplished all of these goals was to do a Facebook Live video, or maybe even a press conference, where he could have read the statement aloud and answered questions via Facebook comments and/or the media. This may have made the response seem more personal and would have allowed him to catch any accusations he missed in the initial response immediately and address them. It is also easier to convey emotion physically than verbally and that could have worked in FOF's favor.

Overall, however, I found this response to be ethical. The response was timely, detailed, and well crafted. FOF quickly found out who the employees were and took initial action to

terminate those employees while the investigation for criminal charges was ongoing. The company took responsibility for the actions of the employees and committed itself to better training and more oversight to reduce the likelihood of this type of abuse happening again.

The most interesting part of the whole situation, though, is that based on the comments on the Facebook post, it really did not matter what FOF and McCloskey said; most people had already passed judgement. Naturally, this situation violated the four motivators Fitzpatrick and Bronstein (2006) identified, discussed previously, so it gained much attention and caused strong reactions. Even if McCloskey had addressed the veal industry and added more emotion, I am not convinced that it would have helped that much. The anger and outrage from the public was astoundingly strong. It is clear that apologizing and explaining next steps was never going to be enough to satisfy people's anger over the situation. Whether or not refusing to accept any apology or explanation, and responding accordingly, is ethical is beyond the scope of this report. But the strong reaction from the public, despite a solid apology from the company, was a key factor in why I selected this topic.

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