

Study finds why some firms are 'named and shamed' by activists

July 15 2014, by Jeff Grabmeier

A new study of the anti-sweatshop campaigns of the 1990s reveals which companies are most likely to become targets of anti-corporate activists.

Researchers found that companies tended to attract the attention of labor activists if they were large, had prominent brand images, or had good corporate reputations. When combined, these factors were especially important.

"Companies that had all of these characteristics were nearly guaranteed to be a target of activism," said Tim Bartley, lead author of the study and associate professor of sociology at The Ohio State University.

"Social movements are increasingly pressuring companies to act in socially or environmentally responsible ways, so we wanted to see which companies are most likely to be pushed into this role. Nearly all of the large firms in the apparel industry of the 1990s could be credibly charged with benefiting from sweatshops, but only a small subset were named and shamed by activists."

Bartley said the results suggest that activists chose companies whose visibility in the public and overall good reputation might make them more "shameable" than other firms. "Activists have enthusiastically adopted the strategy of trying to turn corporate strengths into vulnerabilities."

The researchers focused on 151 large U.S. lead firms in the apparel,

textile and footwear industries. They looked for evidence of anti-sweatshop activism from 1993 to 2000 that was reported in major trade journals.

Bartley conducted the study with Curtis Child of Brigham Young University. Their results appear online in the journal *American Sociological Review* and will be published in the August print edition.

One surprise was that globalization didn't seem to play a role in which firms were targeted, Bartley said. Companies that relied heavily on foreign factories were not necessarily more likely to attract activism than firms with less of a global reach.

"Anti-sweatshop activism wasn't as much a backlash against globalization as it has been portrayed," he said.

Bartley said the tactics used by [activists](#) against apparel [firms](#) in the 1990s are now being used against the electronics industry today. He believes many of the results found here would apply to today's activism.

But will it have an effect on the companies?

In a previous study, Bartley found that anti-sweatshop activism did lead to lower sales for specialized apparel and footwear brands, and that major anti-sweatshop events hurt corporate stock prices, at least for a while.

"Companies are realizing that not every campaign against them will make a dent, but some of them will," Bartley said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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