

Business Leadership: Summative Case Study #1

Toms Shoes Ethics Case Study



Toms Shoes Controversy: A Call to Move From Discussion to Action

Author: Kate Otto

This week, the social enterprise TOMS Shoes asked customers to participate in an awareness-raising exercise called "A Day Without Shoes" in which participants would sacrifice wearing shoes for one day, "so kids don't have to." TOMS' model of social entrepreneurship is a "one-for-one" approach: for every pair of shoes you buy from TOMS, they provide one free pair to a child who has no shoes, somewhere in the world.

Sounds pretty decent, right?

However in response to the "A Day Without Shoes" campaign, a cadre of critical thinkers last year circulated a set of counter-points in a video titled, "A Day Without Dignity." Echoing many of the concerned sentiments that came to the surface in "Kony 2012" debates, TOMS-haters point out that TOMS' marketing pitch dehumanizes poor people and sets priorities for them, rather than letting them set their own. Plus, they explain, giving away shoes for free distorts local shoe markets, thereby eliminating local profits, creating more poverty, and thus creating more need for hand-outs.

As one of many 'aid debates' (many of which are discussed deeply by "Day without Dignity" creator "Good Intentions are not Enough") the controversy over the TOMS model is one that deserves our attention and discussion.

Should we demonize TOMS for representing the kind of "bad aid" that hurts instead of helps poor communities, by 'giving a fish' rather than 'teaching to fish'?

Or should we decry the hardened cynics for not missing the forest for the trees? After all, TOMS has a well-developed plan to get specific size orders for every child in a community they plan to help, and follows those children with shoe donations through their childhood.

Not to say that TOMS doesn't deserve the critique -- they do, and they should amend their operations to invest in local shoe markets as well, to be more holistic and helpful with their good intentions. But we should keep in mind the purpose of the heated debates (which are made more accessible by technology and social media) are not just about discussing, but doing.

To simply say, "TOMS sucks" and dismiss their work would be a major disservice, because in reality there is immense value to be tapped from the system TOMS has created, of supporting trusted community partners like PIH. It may not be a perfect system, but with helpful (not entirely cynical-dismissive) feedback, their system can be improved.

At the same time, to blindly follow a celebrity-studded campaign telling you, "Kids need shoes, so go barefoot to empathize!" is also an unhelpful oversimplification resulting in nothing more than blisters and maybe a skin infection. The act of 'buy one to give one' is indeed a fantastic way of getting people superficially 'involved' in service work without them even realizing it, but this kind of aloof giving model (1) dangerously perpetuates components of the 'white savior industrial complex', turning the characters into heroes/victims rather than fellow people; and (2) dumbs down complex problems thereby dismissing the true need to think critically about solutions to global health, education, and economic dilemmas.

Discussion is crucial, yet it's a first step. The second is doing. If you've blindly adored TOMS to date, take a deeper look at the potential issues in their model and educate yourself about proper design of service initiatives. Or, if you don't like what TOMS is doing, show the world what you're doing better, and ask TOMS to match your effort. Or better yet -- partner with you.

Days without shoes and days without dignity both sound terrible to me. But the days equally worst, in my opinion, are the days full of action, having not properly discussed the implications, and days full of discussion, but without any 'doing.'

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