

Walmart



When the Worst Happens:

*Walmart countering community strife,
evaluating corporate values and tackling gun
violence in the wake of the El Paso shooting.*

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Synopsis

On August 3, 2019, an El Paso Walmart faced a serious incident. A shooter entered the store and killed 22 individuals, as well as injuring 24 others. Walmart, a leader in American commerce, has previously faced similar events like the shooting of two of its associates by an ex-associate, but never one at this level (CNN, 2019).

In the following months, Walmart supported the local community, altered corporate policy and became a leader in the gun regulation debate. As the largest employer in the country and a 2019 Top 50 Forbes' Most Valuable Brand, Walmart's corporate policies affect many Americans.

As the corporation sought to adjust these policies, it faced backlash from other stakeholders. Citizens and organizations have made their voices heard regarding the advances in policy, namely Walmart's choice to ask customers to avoid open-carry in its stores. Despite financial and brand impacts, Walmart continues forward seeking to prevent a similar disaster.

Regardless of negative outside sentiments, Walmart is making strides in protecting its primary stakeholders: the associates. Walmart appears to follow the Page Principles by remaining calm, transparent and informative in its messages.



FOX NEWS, 2019

Figure 1: Reopening of El Paso Walmart location

Walmart and Guns

Corporate Snapshot

Walmart Inc., headquartered in Bentonville, Arkansas, is the second-largest retailer in the world. Led by President and CEO Doug McMillon, the company earned about \$514.4 billion in revenue and \$6.7 billion in profits last year. It is ranked No. 26 on Forbes' World's Most Valuable Brands for 2019. With about 2.2 million employees, according to its corporate site, Walmart is also the largest employer in the United States of America. According to Forbes, Walmart was the tenth-largest American public company in 2018.



Figure 2: Data on American stores from Walmart's corporate website

Messaging Strategy

In 2008, Steven Restivo, former director of corporate affairs for Walmart in the Northeast Region, defined three audiences the company used to focus its communications (LaPointe, 2008).

- *Media*
- *Government*
- *Consumers*

Furthermore, Restivo broke down the consumer-facing strategy into four categories: healthcare, sustainability, opportunity and community. These categories defined the types of Walmart stories the company wanted to promote. Each story shared how Walmart had a positive impact on the lives of its customers and associates. The focus on sharing employee stories is still seen in contemporary Walmart messaging.

In 2012, the brand shifted its corporate communications strategy to focus on sharing Walmart's community and environmental efforts, history, industry innovation and employee relations (Brightspot, 2018).

"The world has changed, and we recognized that we, as a team, needed to change the way we present and tell the rich stories we've been waiting to tell," said Chad Mitchell, former senior director of digital communications at Walmart.

Walmart as a Gun Retailer

Walmart has a long history of serving hunters as a gun retailer. Its main focus is on sales to responsible sportsmen and women, which is reflected in the range of guns. At Walmart, customers are able to buy long-barrel guns for hunting and sport shooting, including shotguns, single-shot hunting rifles and light sporting rifles, as well as BB and pellet guns.

The company also has stricter restrictions for gun-buyers than the Federal government. A background check must come back with a “green light,” instead of merely reflecting a lack of a “red light.” Walmart’s corporate FAQ also states that it uses the following additional security measures:

- *Videotaping the point of sale for firearms;*
- *Allowing only select associates who have passed a criminal background check to sell firearms;*
- *Conducting regular associate training;*
- *Performing inventory audits; and*
- *Securing firearms in a locking case, among other important measures.*

Gun Retailer Timeline

1994: Stops selling handguns in all states except for Alaska

2006: Reduces number of stores with guns to a third of all stores

2009: Many stores bring back guns due to the recession. At this point, about half of the total stores sell guns

2015: Stop selling modern sporting rifles, like the AR-15s used in the Sandy Hook, Connecticut and Aurora, Colorado, shootings

2017: Removes the bump stock accessory, like the one used in the Las Vegas shooting

2018: Raises buying age to 21, referencing the Parkland shooting in the accompanying statement

2019:

July: Stops all gun sales in New Mexico due to increased state-level requirements

September: Stops selling handguns and ammunition in Alaska and asked people not to open carry

With each reduction of gun and gun accessory availability, Walmart’s accompanying statements always cite that the decision was made based on consumer research. However, Walmart has diversified the range of rifles available in-store because customer feedback showed a demand for that type of gun, according to Reuters via The Washington Post.

Who is Walmart

Mission Statement

“To save people money so they can live better.”

As shown in its mission statement, Walmart’s position as a discount retailer is reliant on offering customers the lowest prices available, which is often the reason Americans are loyal to the brand.

Role in American Culture

When Samuel Walton opened his first dime store in the 1950s, he did not know that his stores would fill the role in America they do today. Inspired by the success of his dime store, Walton opened the first Walmart in 1962. In the nearly 60 years since, the company ingrained itself into American culture. Out of the 324 million people who live in the U.S. (U.S. Census, 2019), around 140 million customers visit Walmart in person or online every week, according to Walmart’s corporate blog (Byrum, 2016).

According to NPR, Walmart has replaced the town square in the lives of Americans. Everything from weddings officiated by former Alaska governor Sarah Palin to run-ins with bats (CBS, 2011) and customers sampling raw meat (PennLive, 2011) have been reported in Walmart stores. Websites like the now-famous “People of Walmart” (peopleofwalmart, 2019) helped skew this perception with images of customers doing unusual things in the store. With the large number of unusual news stories emerging from Walmart stores, it can be easy for the public to have a distorted view of the type of people who shop at Walmart.

Company Timeline

1962: First Walmart store opens

1979: Broadens corporate giving by establishing the Walton Family Foundation

1992: Walton receives Medal of Freedom for his contributions to his community and country

2002: Walmart hits top of Fortune 500 ranking of largest American companies

2005: Walmart takes a leading role in disaster relief through aid given to victims of hurricanes Katrina and Rita

2013: Walmart commits to buying \$250 billion in American goods

2016: Walmart dedicates itself to become the most-trusted American brand by 2025

2019: El Paso Walmart shooting occurs

Reputation Bank

Walmart promised its stakeholders that it would become a responsible, sustainable company by 2025, according to a report on its corporate website. The top three issues that their stakeholders valued are:

- * **Economic opportunity for Walmart associates**
- * **Safety and livelihoods of workers in supply chains**
- * **Climate change**

Economic Opportunity

Since 2015, Walmart has worked to increase economic mobility for its associates through funding programs and hiring more than 120,000 new veteran associates and providing training and support to women in retail and agriculture (Walmart, 2016). With more than 2 million associates, these training initiatives can help associates improve their lives.

According to Walmart, 75% of US store managers started as hourly associates; McMillon himself started at Walmart as a teen working in a warehouse. The corporate website emphasizes Walmart's goal to provide their associates the skills to reach their career goals.

Supply Chain Efforts

Walmart strives to support the safety of the workers throughout its supply chain because it believes that it helps the community and their business. In 2015, Walmart established a new audit to make their suppliers accountable (Walmart, 2016). Among the requirements Walmart requires all work to be voluntary, workers to be paid for all labor, and specific health and safety standards to be met.

Climate Change

Walmart is working to decrease the amount of waste it and its suppliers create. One of its current priorities at the moment is moving toward a zero-waste future because the company sees the 3.5 million tons of waste produced daily across the globe as a double loss, wasted materials and loss of land to the landfill. In 2015, its US stores diverted 82% of materials from landfills. Additionally, Walmart is working to reduce its emissions according to its sustainability report both internally and externally. In 2015 Walmart decreased their CO2 emissions by 650,000 metric tons (Walmart, 2016).

Mass Shootings in America

Over the past decade a recurring disaster has traumatized the United States: mass shootings across the nation. Each incident brings refreshed trauma and heartbreak to the forefront of the American conscious.

According to Business Insider, “assault by gun” is the 18th-leading cause of death and “mass shooting” is ranked 32 in October of 2018. Since 2010, mass shootings caused 512 deaths and 865 injuries as of August 2, 2019, (Wilson, 2019).

Despite its prevalence, shootings are tragedies that businesses are often not prepared for, both in security and public relations.



WILSON, 2019

Figure 3: Map of reported shootings from Wilson

El Paso Shooting

August 3:

10 a.m.-11 a.m.: Shooter kills 22 people and injures 24 others, enters police custody within an hour

3:14 p.m.: Walmart releases a statement on its website and Twitter

August 7: Walmart makes a donation to the El Paso community. It offers counseling for those on-site and \$400,000 in damages

August 9: Walmart bans violent imagery in stores

August 22: Walmart announces eventual reopening of El Paso location

September 3:

1:22 p.m.: Walmart requests that customers do not openly carry in their stores, and stops handgun sales and reduces its ammo inventory

5:37 p.m.: NRA releases statement denounces Walmart's decision

October 23: Walmart announces up to \$1.5 million in grants available for El Paso non-profit organizations

November 14: El Paso Walmart location reopens

Messages to Stakeholders

Corporate Response

In the first five days after the shooting, Walmart released three statements about the incident. The first was released four hours after the shooting was confirmed on Twitter and on the company's corporate blog. It expressed sympathy for the victims and support for the community, employees and first responders. Additionally, the statement is available in Spanish, an important step in making sure the message can be read by those in the El Paso community.

On August 7, Doug McMillon publicly released his personal statement to employees. McMillon emphasized community within Walmart associates, including himself as part of that team. He mentioned that the company continues to foster an inclusive environment, condemning the actions of the shooter. McMillon concluded by continuing to express support for associates, customers and law enforcement. He ended the letter with a brief thank you to associates, stating that he was proud of how the way they represented Walmart during the tumultuous period.

The third press release came on the same day, announcing a donation of \$400,000 to the El Paso community.

On September 3, McMillon released another letter to associates regarding the company's next steps. He stated that Walmart had been listening to what people have been saying, both internally and externally, and the company decided that it was time to take a more active role in making the country safer. Namely, Walmart announced that it would discontinue sales of short-barrel rifle ammunition, handgun ammunition and handguns in Alaska, the last state where Walmart sold that type of gun. Overall, McMillon stated that the company predicts that these new policies would reduce its market share of ammunition from around 20% to 6%-9%.

Furthermore, McMillon respectfully requested that customers no longer openly carry firearms into stores in states where open-carry laws exist. He cited multiple incidents in which law enforcement were called to stores due to other customers' concerns about the guns. He also stated that the No. 1 priority when it came to enforcing this rule was associate safety.

A final part to this statement was a commitment to working with other retailers to make the industry safer overall, and a call to action for the nation's leaders to strengthen background checks and remove guns from those proven to be a danger to others. He concluded this letter with reassuring customers that Walmart was not taking an anti-gun stance. McMillon cited personal and company history surrounding hunting, saying that the



Maintaining a Safe Environment



Open Carry of Firearms

Motivated by our desire to help maintain a safe environment for our customers and associates, we are requesting that customers **no longer openly carry firearms** into our stores or Sam's Clubs in states where "open carry" is permitted – unless they are authorized law enforcement officers. We continue to **follow state and local laws** regarding concealed carry permit holders in our stores.



Store Security

We will continue to assess the security of our stores through a **robust process** designed to help allocate resources. This includes adding third-party security at stores or uniformed off-duty police officers where necessary, using additional technologies to assist in deterring crimes and working collaboratively with local law enforcement to help address concerns in the community.

WALMART, 2019

Figure 4: Graphic from Walmart's corporate website

company is still committed to serving responsible hunters and sportsmen and women. He noted that it is a complex situation, and the company is simply taking steps to reduce the risk of mass violence.

At the end of October, the company announced a community initiative specifically for the El Paso area. It will award up to \$1.5 million in matching grants to eligible local non-profits through two local initiatives. Part of the accompanying statement includes this quote from Todd Peterson, Walmart vice president and regional general manager: "We remain deeply moved by the resiliency and continued outpouring of compassion and generosity of the El Paso community."

NRA Response

In response to McMillon's September 3 letter reducing ammunition sales and asking people to not open carry in stores, the NRA put out the following statement:



TWITTER, 2019

Figure 5: Walmart stock performance

Walmart has yet to respond to this statement. It also had no visible impact on the company's stock, as it ended that day selling 0.3 higher than it opened that morning (CNBC Market 2019).

Social Media Response

In the wake of the shooting, users took to Twitter to share their experiences with guns in Walmart's sports department. They shared anecdotal stories about how easy it is to acquire a gun from the store and how current checks in the system cannot effectively manage who is permitted to own a gun.

In fact, many people took the opportunity to call on Walmart to stop selling guns altogether. Several celebrities, including activist Alyssa Milano, expressed the sentiment that Walmart should take this as a signal to become a leader in gun regulation.

However, beyond sharing its initial statements, Walmart did not have much of a social media response to these calls to action.

Shannon Watts, the founder of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, an organization dedicated to fighting for gun reform after the Sandy Hook school shooting, expressed her appreciation of Walmart's decision to change its policies in September.



SHANNONWATTS, 2019

Figure 6: Tweet from Shannon Watts, gun control activist

Business Implications

Sales Growth

According to BOOX Research, 2019 was Walmart's "better-than-expected" year for earnings. Walmart's revenue continues to grow despite the incident in El Paso.

The company's third-quarter management commentary showed its net sales have increased by 3.3% (McMillon, 2019). Walmart's comparable sales, which include sales from stores open for the previous 12 months including remodels, relocations and expansions, are up 3.2%, according to Walmart's third-quarter management commentary (McMillon, 2019).

Stock Performance

Figure 7 demonstrates how Walmart's stock continues to climb and the incident in El Paso has not made any detrimental impact to its stock performance, indicating that its investors and shareholders did not lose faith in the company. However, analysts from BOOX Research state that valuation has become concerning in regards to its longevity as the stock is trading with some of the widest premiums of the decade, suggesting it is relatively expensive.



Figure 7: Walmart stock performance

NYSE, 2019

Long-term Reputation

Walmart is the 11th most valuable brand in 2019 (Statista, 2019). Statista bases its brand valuation on its total value, which is determined by whether brands follow the International Organization for Standardization's ISO 10668 standard that includes six requirements: transparency, validity, reliability, sufficiency, objectivity and financial, behavioral and legal parameters.

Walmart is perceived as a top retailer of guns in the United States, comparable to Bass Pro Shop and previously Dicks Sporting Goods. This reputation is largely based on the company's founder Samuel Walton and his enthusiasm for hunting, but Walmart only represents 2% of the country's firearm sales (Reinick via Business Insider, 2019).

However, Burt Flickinger III, managing director of retail consultant Strategic Resources Group, told CNN Business that gun sales are not Walmart's "high-margin business."

"Guns and ammo were important to Walmart in the 20th century, maybe the first decade of this one, but it's declining while other segments like toys and pets are growing. This is the biggest opportunity for the

company in the last 25 years,” Flickinger said.

Walmart’s reputation could be impacted by how the company positions itself in the debate on gun violence. Walmart’s current stance can best be summed by McMillon’s statements, which supports the ban on military-style rifles. The company wants to encourage debate on the availability of assault weapons while keeping them out of the hands of mass murderers. Walmart also supports research into understanding the causes of this type of violent behavior (McMillon, Walmart Q2 Management Commentary).

Analysts from BOOX Research believe Walmart will face difficulty with comparable sales in 2020 as it will be difficult to maintain the high levels seen in 2019. Analysts say to maintain such levels an extra push from a combination of higher transaction volume and higher ticket prices will be required (BOOX Research, 2019).

Looking Ahead

Corporations have evolved to be leaders of change in society, hence the rise of corporate social responsibility as a necessary practice for companies (Rangan, Chase, Karim, 2012). The company’s national influence and its role in one of the country’s most controversial issues places Walmart at the head of this conversation (Sorkin, 2019).

How Walmart positions itself in the gun regulation debate will be used as a guide for other companies as they face a similar event or implement crisis management plans to prepare for one (MarketWatch, 2019). Additionally, how it does so will impact its relationship with its stakeholders, both those who hunt and those who don’t.

Walmart’s current position reflects its loyalty to responsible sportsmen and women, encourages public debate but also incorporates policy changes that demonstrate Walmart will be participating in the conversation (McMillon, 2019). This loyalty to its sportsmen/women suggests Walmart aligns with the Page Principle: Realize an enterprise’s true character is expressed by its people. The company’s policy changes suggest Walmart follows another one of the Page Principles: Prove it with Action (The Page Principles, 2019).

Walmart’s response recognizes that mass shootings are a nationwide issue that cannot be ignored by a company who’s stores serve as a community hub across the country, especially in El Paso (Isidore, 2019).

Going forward, Walmart has a choice to be a leading voice in the gun regulation debate. But to be a leading voice, society will demand the company to take a firm stance (Ong, 2019). Walmart will need to assess its values, mission and vision to determine how it will address this issue in the future. Every corporation must understand that consumers make value-driven decisions and expect companies to engage in controversial societal issues (Dodd, 2018). The American brand faces an American issue, and it will have to decide what its mission, to “live better,” means for society.

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