

Chick-fil-A: Sandwiches and Culture Wars (B)

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On October 18, 2019, 10 days after its opening in The Oracle Centre (Reading, UK), the manager of the mall told Chick-fil-A that they would not extend the six-month contract with the food chain because “We always look to introduce new concepts for our customers, however, we have decided on this occasion that the right thing to do is to only allow Chick-Fil-A to trade with us for the initial six-month pilot period, and not to extend the lease any further.”¹

Reading Pride (the local LGBTQ+ activist group) said The Oracle's decision was “good news”, adding the six-month period was a “reasonable request [...] to allow for re-settlement and notice for employees that have moved from other jobs”. But the activist organization said that they would continue to campaign against the outlet until the day it left.

Some of the beneficiaries of Chick-fil-A's donations also reacted publicly. For instance, the UK Salvation Army “strongly objected to being presented as homophobic or transphobic”, adding that it had LGBTQ+ members and served people “without discrimination”.²

Then, on November 18, Chick-fil-A released a statement announcing changes to its charitable giving program and announced a “more focused giving approach” to its charitable contributions, pledging \$9 million in 2020 to end hunger and homelessness.

Also, the Foundation announced a more short-term philanthropic approach instead of multiyear commitments, and affirmed that, from that moment on, the Foundation would reassess its philanthropic partnerships annually to allow maximum impact.

While it would still support some long-lasting initiatives, like the scholarship program for employees and their families; the True Inspiration Awards to local organizations; and the revitalization of the west side of Atlanta, the company's birthplace; the company announced its new priorities:

- 1) To support education - the Foundation planned to expand its partnership with Junior Achievement USA, an organization that reaches nearly 5 million children annually, from kindergarten to 12th grade students. Its activities foster work-readiness, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy skills.

This case was prepared by Professor Yago de la Cierva and Eduardo Notario, research collaborator. March 2021.
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- 2) To help the homeless - the Foundation decided to expand its partnership with Covenant House International, an organization that has been working for more than forty years in assisting more than a million homeless, runaway and trafficked young people.
- 3) To fight hunger - the Foundation will support more than 120 communities by dedicating \$25,000 to a local food bank at each new Chick-fil-A opening.

Those would be the only charitable initiatives receiving financial support from the Foundation in 2020. Therefore, more than 80 other organizations would miss out on funding they had received in 2019.

Among the customary beneficiaries of the Foundation's generosity, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and the Salvation Army (organizations criticized by LGBTQ+) were nowhere to be seen. In that statement, Chick-fil-A did not elaborate on the decision to stop funding the two groups, except to say that its charitable arm had fulfilled multi-year commitments to both groups that ended in 2018, and it would not renew them.

The decision was communicated in an online press conference.³

Chick-fil-A's CEO was more explicit in an interview with *Bisnow*. Tassopoulos explained that "There's no question that, as we go into new markets, we need to be clear about who we are," - and that goal was being thwarted by public misperception - "There are lots of articles and newscasts about Chick-fil-A, and we thought we needed to be clear about our message."⁴

According to him, future partners could include faith-based and non-faith-based charities, but the company said none of the organizations have anti-LGBTQ+ positions. "This provides more focus and more clarity," Tassopoulos said. "We think [education, hunger and homelessness] are critical issues in communities where we do business in the U.S."⁵

For Chick-fil-A's President and COO, public controversy around the company hadn't negatively impacted sales, but it did make a dent in the company's brand. So, after years of "taking it on the chin," as a Chick-fil-A executive told *Bisnow*, the latest round of headlines was impossible to ignore. This time, it was impeding the company's growth.

The company recognized that changes were needed, especially if some communities did not want to see a Chick-fil-A nearby. "When there is a tension, we want to make sure we're being clear. We think this is going to be helpful," Tassopoulos said. "It's just the right thing to do: to be clear, caring and supportive, and do it in the community."⁶

In the Press

Chick-fil-A decision got very positive media coverage and was applauded almost everywhere. At least at the beginning.

It is worth noting that several media outlets explicitly connected the decision to a new policy of not funding organizations considered anti-LGBTQ+, almost as if it were a clear case of cause and effect.⁷ However, the Foundation statement never mentioned LGBTQ+ rights, the Salvation Army and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes were not specifically defunded, and most of the organizations left without financial support for 2020 didn't have a public stand on the issue.

In fact, as some fact-checking journalists pointed out, the decision was misreported: "the company did not 'promise' to stop donating to anti-LGBTQ groups."⁸ One analyst, for instance, highlighted the fact that "Chick-fil-A has repeatedly declined to specify that the cut to the



controversial groups' funding was linked to their LGBT-rights records, and a company spokesperson would not rule out the possibility that the groups could receive funding again in the future, as long as they are highly effective in areas of hunger, homelessness and education."⁹

Perhaps due to this lack of clarity, some commentators attributed the decision to economic reasons rather than a change of mind:

Make no mistake, Chick-fil-A's ultimate goal is not in the political or religious realm, but rather to get their food into the mouths of as many people as possible. This is not an ideological shift, but rather an economic one. If Chick-fil-A wants to prove their commitment to change, they should do more than stop funding a measly two organizations – where is the apology to LGBTQ+ community? Where is the compensation for those who have had to undergo conversion therapy on Chick-fil-A's dime? These restorative measures will most likely never come, and that is because Chick-fil-A is the same company they have always been, just with better public relations.¹⁰

For the same reason, a contributor to *Forbes* stated:

Until we can verify that Chick-fil-A has truly stopped funding anti-LGBTQ forces, I can't give them my money. And also, I am morally opposed to marketing that promotes spelling mistakes, even by cows.¹¹

On the conservative side, comments were also critical. Rod Dreher, for instance, after describing the decision as a "capitulation to progressive bullies", added:

Chick-fil-A has managed to become the third-biggest fast-food chain in the US, despite earning so much progressive hatred for honoring what its leadership once claimed was fidelity to "a much higher calling". But now, in 2019, as it sits near the summit of business success, Chick-fil-A suddenly finds that it can no longer afford to follow that "higher calling," and is cutting the Salvation Army and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes off. I love Chick-fil-A, but it's going to be a while before I go there again. This is nothing but gutless surrender.¹²

Friends and Foes Agree

One of the first US organizations reacting about this change was the Salvation Army, which - in a statement that didn't mention Chick-fil-A by name - commented:

We're saddened to learn that a corporate partner has felt it necessary to divert funding to other hunger, education and homelessness organizations – areas in which The Salvation Army, as the largest social services provider in the world, is already fully committed. We serve more than 23 million individuals a year, including those in the LGBTQ+ community. In fact, we believe we are the largest provider of poverty relief to the LGBTQ+ population. When misinformation is perpetuated without fact, our ability to serve those in need, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, religion or any other factor, is at risk. We urge the public to seek the truth before rushing to ill-informed judgment and greatly appreciate those partners and donors who ensure that anyone who needs our help feels safe and comfortable coming through our doors.¹³

Greg Abbott, Texas Governor – he who, a few months earlier, had signed into law a "religious discrimination protection" measure, nicknamed the "Save Chick-fil-A" bill – ironically denounced the decision on Twitter and vowed to have his dinner at a local joint instead.