

RESOURCE 3

Conscientious Consuming: Keys to a Successful Organised Boycott

A Clear Issue

Monroe Friedman, writing in the Journal of Social Issues, states “successful boycotts tended to be cognitively simple and emotionally appealing.” This is perhaps best illustrated in the case of the boycott of canned tuna. The premise is simple and emotional: why do fishermen need to kill dolphins to make canned tuna? (Remember Flipper, the frolicking dolphin that played with children?)

Just as it’s important to communicate the reasons for the boycott to the public, it’s just as important to communicate the reasons for the boycott to the boycotted company. In some cases, when the companies were presented good reasons to change their behavior (the threat of a boycott and its negative publicity), they changed it.

A Visible Target

Companies that sell consumer products are very sensitive to their corporate image. The negative publicity associated with a boycott (or threat of a boycott) can effect a company’s image in addition to its sales.

The Rainforest Action Network initiated a boycott against Burger King for purchasing beef that was raised in destroyed rain forests. According to the Rainforest Action Network, the protests conducted at the restaurants and the associated negative publicity were particularly effect in changing Burger King’s use of “rainforest beef.”

Clear Alternatives to the Boycotted Product

In the Burger King case consumers had clear alternatives - McDonald’s, Wendy’s, etc. Boycott organisers are wise to make sure that the companies being boycotted know that consumers are not just boycotting them, but also supporting their competitors!

Visibility of Violations

Because successful boycotts rely on damaging both the sales and image of the offending company, the visibility of violations is important. The more visible violations and violators are, the more public pressure can be applied.

Animal rights activists are against the manufacture of animal fur clothing. Stores that sell fur coats are visible and natural targets for boycotts. In addition, people that wear fur coats have been the recipients of public scorn. In this case, because of the nature of the product, not only the seller but also the consumer has their public image effected negatively by the boycotted product.

The opportunity to boycott both the producer and consumer of a product can greatly increase the effectiveness of a boycott. Other products, such as products that are not publicly purchased or consumed, are be more difficult to boycott effectively.

An Organised Effort

It is not uncommon for a boycott to take years to be successful. In many cases like-minded individuals have created nonprofit organisations to further their causes. This can make it easier to gather funding, create educational materials, receive publicity and promote their cause. Today, the Internet and this web site give consumers additional opportunities to organise.

Why Boycotts Work

The bottom line is that companies survive on consumer dollars. The power consumers have is their dollars and the influence they exert comes from their consumer choices. If a company realises that their conduct or actions are costing them dollars in sales or profits, they will change them.

Source: <http://www.conscientiousconsuming.com>