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Appeals to Businesses and Corporations: The ABCs of GE

General Electric consistently rates an F across several electronics categories in the Better World Shopper website. It’s listed in the “Top 10 Worst” and “Top 100 Corporate Criminals” by Multinational Monitor, a corporation analysis magazine. However, GE has also been awarded “100 Most Sustainable Corporations” by Corporate Knights, and an Equality Score of 86/100 by the Human Rights Campaign. So how does a company end up with both positive and negative awards?

In the past, GE had committed several corporate crimes. As detailed by the website CleanUpGE.org, these crimes include dumping “over 1.3 million pounds of PCBs” into the Hudson River, as well as “deliberately releas[ing] radioactive material to see how far downwind the radioactive material would travel” in 1949. In 1986, congressional hearings held my Edward Marker revealed that GE ran experiments on “human subjects that were captive audiences or populations ... considered ‘expendable’ ... the elderly, prisoners and hospital patients...” However, GE’s own website doesn’t address these issues. Instead, the website tries to convince its readers that it is a positive company by highlighting their positive projects.

The site caters to an audience of businesses, investors, and potential employees, as evidenced by their tabs. In order, these tabs are, “for business,” “for consumers,” “our company,” “news,” “investor relations,” and “careers.” While there is a “for consumers” tab, they are not included in the audience because that tab eventually leads to a separate GE site that’s specifically for consumer products. As you scroll down the main page, a section challenges the reader with questions like, “Think you've got the algorithm to solve flight inefficiencies?” and then offers a cash prize. This kind of question is aimed at students and potential employees.

GE’s primary appeal is to show how efficient the company is, a type of logos appeal. On the main page, under the first story banner, is a slideshow of 6 dots, each showcasing a different project. On the left are photographs with some nice clean diagrams overlaid, and on the right are a couple of sentences describing the project. For example, one project states: “GE's Grid IQ SaaS allows utilities to monitor, manage and control their grid more intelligently without worrying about the ongoing IT costs. Using a cloud computing services model, these capabilities can be deployed in 50% less time than traditional turnkey project models with just 10% of the estimated implementation cost.” All of the slides follow this pattern of, “this is what our product does; this is how it helps efficiency.” This is an effective logical appeal to the audience — especially investors, who like to be comfortable in knowing that their money is being put towards increasing efficiencies and innovations, which drive profits.



**Sample visual**: This shows GE’s strategy of using visuals to depict complex systems in an accessible way.

GE also tries to make its ethos appeal to business by showing they hold the same virtues most mainstream American businesses value. The company overview page’s HTML link ends with /b2b, which could mean “business to business.” On that page, the first block of copy states, “GE is building the world by providing capital, expertise and infrastructure for a global economy. GE Capital has provided billions in financing so businesses can build and grow their operations and consumers can build their financial futures.” The second sentence uses a lot of words that appeals to businesses and investors, such as “billions,” “build,” “grow,” and “financial futures.” With this language, GE claims they are of the same ethics as any business in the global economy.

GE also appeals to ethos in a more visual way. In the “moving” section of “stories,” on the right side of the image sits a chart with various statistics about the train: “5.4k — Tons of Tropicana Orange Juice hauled on the Juice Train,” “3.2k — Feet length of the Juice Train,” and most importantly, “Glasses of Tropicana Orange Juice consumed in the U.S. since loading this page,” which increases every second or two. On the left is a big quote reading, “Powered by GE locomotives, the Juice Train is bringing orange juice to your breakfast table in one of the most efficient ways possible.” The Juice Train article uses visuals to show that GE has worked to help get a food item into the hands of consumers, and that the work is apparently paying off, as evidenced by the ticking orange juice counter.

However, not all of GE’s appeals are about profits and big business; GE also makes appeals to the personal side, the pathos appeal. In a video found under the “curing” section of “stories,” a woman details her story of breast cancer, while emotional music plays in the background. The woman, a GE worker, talks about how she notices the GE label on the machines in the hospital, and how it made her feel proud to be a GE worker. The video ends with her saying that she beat the cancer, and then has shots of her dancing in an empty assembly line room, as if to say, “our workplace is enjoyable — so enjoyable, in fact, that she’s dancing.” This video makes a big appeal to emotion: a heartfelt success story, told by one woman, to make it seem as personal as possible.

Despite all these appeals, GE has not directly defended themselves from the accusations detailed by CleanUpGE.org. In fact, the whole main website is scant on information about GE’s stance on environmental or individual rights. While the slideshow on the main page alludes to environmental problems, it’s from the angle of fixing inefficiencies. Every link under the “our company” tab leads to a page on the same site, except for “citizenship,” which leads to another site altogether. The fact that GE separates its virtues about people into another website can be interpreted as either “they don’t care enough to put it on the main page,” or “they care so much it wouldn’t all fit on the main page.”

One thing is for certain, though: this website is definitely less flashy than their main site. The margins no longer spread the entire screen, making it feel cramped in comparison. The color scheme has switched from a comfortable blue to a jarring purple. The whole site feels out of place, orphaned from the main page. After some clicking around through various lists, I did find a page on energy consumption, with the first line reading, “Climate and energy represent two of the most important business challenges of the century.” Even on environmental issues, GE approaches this from a business angle.

GE makes strong appeals to its target audience, businesses and investors. But if you’re going on to the site looking for proof of environmental virtue, you won’t find much, and what you will find is much less visually appealing than what’s on the main page, with fewer bits of easily digestible information. While GE doesn’t have direct responses to their accusers, it is possible that their defense is to hide away the information in a virtual back room, making it harder for those looking for environmental and humane issues to find what they want. Of course, this isn’t too surprising, as the goal of any business website is to provide the information that will make you buy the product, and no advertiser would purposefully highlight the negative aspects of their company if they’re trying to convince their audience.

(1246 words)

**Commentary from the prof**: I’m setting this up as a model because of it generally high level of critical thinking and writing fluency. If you look for a clear “backbone” of topic sentences and smooth transitions, this isn’t maybe the best model, but it feels fluid when you are reading it. There is also a great attention to detail, with every claim made about the site supported with detailed evidence from the site. Overall, it was one of the most impressive papers I got that semester. P.S. I added a visual, as this semester I am requiring that you all include a visual from the site. It doesn’t have to go with your “logos” paragraph, but since that is where this student got into discussing a particular visual and made an overall claim about this site’s strategy with visuals, that seemed to be the logical place. You decide based on your site which visual would best make a point about your site’s visual strategy.