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Company: Barilla

Saboteur: Company CEO Guido Barilla

Big Mistake (Huge): On September 25, 2013, Guido Barilla, CEO of family-owned, global pasta giant Barilla, was asked during a radio interview whether he would ever use gay families in his company's advertising. His answer? "We won't include gays in our ads, because we like the traditional family. If gays don't like it, they can always eat another brand of pasta. Everyone is free to do what they want, provided it doesn't bother anyone else." Barilla also added that his "idea of family is a traditional one in which the woman has a fundamental role."

Fallout: There was an immediate backlash on social media, with LGBTQ activists calling for a boycott of the company's products, which continues. Just in time for [National Pasta Month](#) (October).



Pictures like this appeared all over the Internet within hours.



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Leaving the door open for competitors to show their open-minded, inclusiveness.

Deeper Analysis

According to WikiAnswers, Barilla is the top selling pasta brand in the US and in Italy. With 135 years in business, [the company began a concentrated push of its pasta line](#) and related products just about a year ago, with plans to “boost brand recognition” in the US as well as globally. How did this successful company fall so deeply into the social sabotage trap?

Failure # 1: A Murky Company Message

For a company like Barilla, an incident like this should have been predictable – and preventable. The company’s social media campaigns clearly emphasize the family unit, but it is now obvious that no one took the time to define just what that means – or doesn’t mean, as the case may be. Nothing is ever as simple as it seems. Families come in all shapes and sizes nowadays, and not considering that is what got Barilla into trouble. I’m sure Barilla thought its corporate message was well-defined, but the evidence proves otherwise. If you’re going to claim “family” as the



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backbone of your company's marketing message, then you have to consider what that means – both to you personally, if you're the CEO, and then more broadly, to the world at large, i.e., your potential customer base. Not having a clear definition for everyone who might ever speak for the company was the first failure.

It can't be overstated: YOU ARE YOUR BRAND. When you allow your personal beliefs to overshadow your business model (especially when they are this divisive) you are going to have to fight like hell to get back on track. Gone are the days (if they ever existed) where people will say, "Well, I don't like the owner of the company, but the pasta's good." These days people don't separate the two; if they don't like YOU, then your product is doomed. People cut the cord pretty quickly. Plus, there's a bigger disconnect between, "Well, Mel Gibson is a crazy person, but I like his movies, and all celebrities are lunatics in some way," and "Hey, as me and my gay husband sit around the dinner table with our adopted children, ready to dive in to a steaming bowl of Barilla spaghetti, it's hard not to focus on the fact that they don't recognize my family unit as being WORTHY of their company's promotional campaign. So why am I giving them my money?" You need to know your message inside and out. And you need to make sure the right people are delivering it properly. Which leads us to...

Failure # 2: A Rogue Messenger

For sure, Barilla employs professional marketing and PR people, with well-maintained social media accounts and a solid marketing strategy: easy-to-prepare, quality food at an affordable price, and family, family, family. This is as it should be, letting marketing professionals do the work, and the next failure was letting Guido Barilla in front of a microphone. As [HuffPost Live's](http://HuffPostLive.com) Italian correspondent Giulia Belardelli pointed out, "Everybody was quite surprised because Mr. Barilla doesn't very often appear on media—television or radio—so when the story got viral everybody was 'Oh my God, what is he saying?'"

Just because you are the CEO does not mean you are the best person to speak in public about your company. There is a reason you delegate to professionals in the marketing field, and the fact that Mr. Barilla "doesn't very often appear on media" is telling. The CEO may create the message, but that doesn't mean he should deliver it. And certainly not without vetting the message through his PR department to be sure that everyone is on the same page. This is why understanding social sabotage is crucial – so you can learn to prepare for the unexpected and/or head off catastrophe before it happens. Had Guido Barilla sat key staff and advertisers down and said, "So I want to clarify to the world that our target is traditional families and not gay families," he would likely have been talked out of it. At the very least he would have been warned of the severity of consequences such a declaration would unleash. Apparently, no such conversation took place and the CEO answered the question posed without thinking through the consequences to his business.



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Tony Case, executive editor of AdWeek said it very clearly, commenting during coverage by Good Morning America, “A statement like this is made – on the other side of the world – it becomes a controversy in a matter of minutes. At the speed of a Tweet it becomes a controversy ... Something like this doesn’t happen in a vacuum these days.” Indeed it does not. Which is exactly [why we are here, ready to help you sidestep those social media landmines.](#)

The damage Barilla did doesn’t end with its customers. The CEO also lost sight of the fact that he doesn’t run his family’s pasta empire single-handedly. The stance he took, very publicly, failed to consider his employees, many of whom are surely gay, or gay rights supporters. Then again, maybe not, considering that [according to the Advocate website](#), Barilla’s equal opportunity policy for employees does not expressly mention sexual orientation (it does prohibit discrimination based on race and religion). Just more fallout fuel for the fire.

As if that weren’t enough, Barilla also alienated women on two fronts, first by not seeming to recognize that gay couples can also comprise two females as well as two males, and second by suggesting that women’s place is still in the kitchen. That’s to say nothing of the men he alienated by suggesting they aren’t capable of making dinner for their families.

Failure # 3: Multiple Apologies

While apologizing is necessary in a situation like this, again, there needs to be a plan. It’s not clear that there was a cohesive strategy for dealing with the sabotage and its backlash. Barilla the Man initially released this apology:

“With reference to statements made yesterday, I apologize if my words have generated controversy or misunderstanding, or if they have hurt the sensibilities of some people. In the interview I simply wanted to highlight the central role of the woman in the family.”

Not exactly ringing with sincerity. Any apology including the word “if” is going to miss the mark. It’s not worth apologizing unless you’re prepared to own the hurt you caused. In this case, the public wasn’t impressed and the social media frenzy continued. Also note the clarification/excuse in the last line, once more underscoring the misguided notion that today’s family is still the model of the 50’s.

The next statement from Mr. Barilla was longer winded and offered further clarification of the first apology:

“With reference to my statement yesterday, I apologize if my words have generated controversy or misunderstanding, and if they have offended the sensibilities of some people.



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For clarity, I wish to point out that I have the deepest respect for all persons, without distinction of any kind.

I have the utmost respect for homosexuals and for the freedom of expression of everyone.

I also said and I repeat that I respect marriages between people of the same sex.

Barilla in its advertising has always chosen to represent the family because this is the symbol of hospitality and affection for everyone.”

Better, but still not enough. You can say you respect all persons until the cows come home, but if your actions (or your stated intentions to act, or not act – by not portraying a gay family in your advertising, for example) don’t mesh with your words, they’re not worth much. Besides, the damage had been done. Any apology after the fact could only come across as a means to an end. “Hey, I just realized that what I said might end up costing me millions. I’m sorry... we good?” That’s why the best move is to not have a slip like this in the first place.

But Barilla continued trying. The US branch of the company posted an apology via Twitter and Facebook that said, “At Barilla, we consider it our mission to treat our consumers and partners as our neighbors – with love and respect – and to deliver the very best products possible. We take this responsibility seriously and consider it a core part of who we are as a family-owned company. While we can’t undo recent remarks, we can apologize. To all of our friends, family, employees, and partners that we have hurt or offended, we are deeply sorry.”

Now THAT is an apology. However, amid all the remarks and clarifications from the CEO, its impact was lessened.

Finally, Guido Barilla took one last stab with a [video apology](#).

The problem with video, as an August story by Jena McGregor at [The Washington Post](#) points out, is that “it’s all too easy for a video apology to actually make things worse.” She warns that, “CEOs can carefully script their words, especially with the help of a good legal and P.R. team. But most of them aren’t actors, and it’s much harder to control the furrowing of an eyebrow or a twitch of their mouths than they may think.” In the case of the Barilla video, the words do sound nice, but it’s clear that Barilla is reading from a teleprompter, and his facial expression throughout could best be described as “blank.”

In the days following the debacle, a “company position” letter took over Barilla’s homepage:



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“At Barilla, we care about everyone, regardless of race, religion, belief, gender or sexual orientation. Our mission is to help people - every single person - live better, by bringing wellbeing and the joy of eating into their everyday lives.

We value and respect a family that includes everyone. As stated in the Barilla lighthouse - our strategy document - we promote diversity. Diversity of all kinds is a clear objective that the company has put forward.

Barilla recognizes cultural, gender and skills diversity as an essential value for the company's well-being. Integrity, inclusion, social and environmental responsibility are the values in which Barilla reflects itself, as results of a strong and widely recognized identity.

Barilla firmly believes that, in order to qualify its business activities as ethical, it shall operate in respecting and safeguarding human rights, the regenerative capabilities of the Planet and the welfare of communities, while promoting a sustainable human development.

Barilla's goal goes beyond bringing high-quality food products that are good for people. We also take care of our planet, by focusing on growing the business of those food products that have a low environmental impact.

We will take advantage of the recent incident to learn and to promote even harder the diversity path that Barilla has undertaken.

To all our friends, family, employees and partners that we have hurt or offended, we are deeply sorry.”

The Recovery

The penultimate paragraph of the above position letter is perhaps the most important part, and Barilla has undoubtedly already learned much from this incident – all of it the hard way. If their CEO is truly committed to meeting with representatives of the groups he has offended, then there may be hope. According to Kevin McCoy at USA Today, “GLAAD, a U.S. advocacy group for the LGBT community that had started asking officials at U.S. supermarket chains to speak out against Barilla's comments, on Monday [Sept. 30] called Barilla's pledge to meet with his critics a ‘good first step.’”

But it’s going to be a long road. McCoy also reported that “Even Dario Fo, the Nobel Prize winner and Italian actor and playwright who once appeared in a Barilla ad, issued an open letter asking the executive to reconsider his wounding of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender



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community. A Change.org petition posted by Fo had drawn more than 52,000 supporting signatures as of Monday. That represents ‘a clear indicator that consumers are still pretty upset. If anything, it appears these campaigns are gaining momentum, not slowing down,’ Change.org spokesman Mark Anthony Dingbaum said Monday.”

Only time will tell how widespread the damage to Barilla’s reputation will be. Bianca Baggia, an Italian friend of [PRI’s The World](#) host Marco Werman, believes, “There’s generational differences in how Italian consumers are reacting. The older generation, like her parents, believes people are free to say or do whatever they want. Others who are closer to the issue feel that the comments coming from Barilla’s CEO are crazy.” So it will depend on who buys more pasta – the older generations, or the younger.

[Forbes contributor, Laura Heller](#), makes the point that, “LGBT may be a minority, but support for their causes casts a much wider net. If support for marriage equality is any indication, the majority of Americans come down on the side of gay rights, according to the [Pew Research Center](#).” Conversely, there may be those who support Barilla’s stance, who believe in the “traditional family” themselves. However, as Heller states, “Those numbers are harder to find.”

So there’s no crystal ball to predict how bad the fallout will truly be, and no time machine to undo what has been done. All that is left is lessons learned. Hopefully other companies will benefit from the mistakes Barilla has made.