
APPLE AND ITS SUPPLIERS: CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

SUMMARY

Will it ever be good enough? That was the key question facing Apple Inc., (Apple) the California-based multinational technology company that was known for its innovative hardware, software, and online services. Apple had been accused of having allowed labour rights violations in China at Foxconn, a major supplier of its products in 2009, but the company had worked hard to overcome these issues to avoid any negative ramifications for its corporate image. Yet on December 18, 2014, new evidence was presented in a British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) documentary that showed that labour rights violations continued to occur in China, this time at Pegatron, another large Apple supplier that specialized in the assembly of Apple's iPhones. This documentary questioned Apple's repeated statement in its 2014 supplier responsibility progress report that "Each of those workers has the right to safe and ethical working conditions."

Jeff Williams had been promoted to the role of senior vice president for Operations only 15 days earlier, when he was put in charge of what Apple called "end-to-end supply chain management . . . dedicated to ensuring that Apple products meet the highest standards of quality." Given the huge progress that Apple had achieved, was the company simply being singled out unfairly because of its size, visibility, and earlier problems? Indeed, Apple now had an excellent reputation in terms of corporate social responsibility (CSR) and, in 2014, had been ranked fifth on *Forbes'* "best CSR reputations" list. As Apple's stock market value moved ever closer to US\$1 trillion, did outside observers hold Apple, the most valuable company ever, to a higher level of corporate social responsibility? Alternatively, had the company still not fully come to terms with the nature and magnitude of its CSR challenges?

It had indeed proven to be difficult to maintain control over Apple's vast operations, particularly when most activities were undertaken through outsourcing to independent suppliers that were mostly situated in offshore locations, such as China, far from Apple's base in California. Perhaps the most important question of all was what Williams and Apple could do to tackle the allegations. Would it suffice to adopt a defensive strategy, by simply denying that the problem was structural in nature and pointing to Apple's many and costly efforts? Or should Apple's management instead engage with the issue and instigate further CSR changes in its sourcing strategy? If so, what changes should be implemented? In short, how should Apple and Williams respond?

Video: few minutes of the video: <https://www.pcmag.com/videos/2015/7/22/apples-broken-promises-pcmag-gr>

THE SMARTPHONE INDUSTRY

In 2014, more than 1.2 billion smartphone devices were sold worldwide, for combined revenues of more than \$380 billion. The competition among the major players — Samsung, Huawei, HTC, Nokia, and Apple — had started to take a toll on the industry's profitability, which led industry experts to suggest that the smartphone industry was reaching its maturity stage, with year-on-year growth set to gradually decline. Apple was the largest player in the industry, accounting for more than 90 per cent of profits in the fourth quarter of 2014 and the first quarter of 2015. Samsung dominated the low end of the smartphone market, while Apple dominated the more lucrative high end.

Besides its superior aesthetic design and cutting-edge features, Apple's products were differentiated from those of its competitors by its use of a proprietary operating system (iOS) and its connection to Apple's successful iTunes website that offered multimedia content for the iPhone and other Apple products. Because of its differentiated position, Apple's iPhone commanded a premium price, which drove up Apple's profitability and market value.

APPLE, THE IPHONE, AND CUSTOMER LOYALTY

Apple was not only the world's most valuable company but also a hallmark of how information technology could change lives. The company was founded in 1976 and started to encroach into the personal computer market from the late 1980s and early 1990s onward. After the company nearly experienced a total collapse, it convinced co-founder Steve Jobs to return in 1997 to revive the company. Jobs and his team succeeded with great verve, launching such innovative products as the iPod and the iPad.

However, Apple's greatest success (as of the writing of this case) came from its debut in the smartphone market. Apple experienced exponential growth since 2008 (see Exhibit 1), and the iPhone was the biggest contributor to its success (see Exhibit 2)

Apple customers were extremely loyal to Apple products, often also buying its computers and tablets alongside the iPhone. For example, a survey conducted by Simonlycontracts.co.uk found that nearly 60 per cent of 3,000 iPhone owners declared that they had "blind loyalty" to their iPhones, and 78 per cent said they couldn't "imagine having a different type of phone."

The Foxconn Affair

Foxconn, headquartered in Taiwan, was one of Apple's biggest and oldest suppliers. In 2014, Apple contributed more than 40 per cent of Foxconn's revenue. It was the biggest privately owned company in Taiwan with \$131.8 billion sales revenue in 2013, and operations that stretched around the globe. Despite its large size, Foxconn, as an original design manufacturer (ODM) had long been an unfamiliar name in the public eye, chiefly because it did not produce its own branded goods.

In 2009, however, the Foxconn name suddenly came to prominence when a factory worker reportedly committed suicide after losing a prototype of the iPhone 4. It was later alleged that the employee's treatment during questioning came close to being torture. One year later, another 18 Foxconn workers attempted to kill themselves, and 14 died at the manufacturing company's facilities. Various explanations were offered for these deaths. Poor labour practices and working conditions were considered to be the main motivations for the employee attempting to commit suicide. Ever since the 2010 incidents, the company had been under increased scrutiny and pressure to improve its working conditions from various stakeholders, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the media, and customers such as Apple.

The Pegatron Crisis

After the Foxconn scandal, Apple and its suppliers were under more scrutiny than ever before. Apple made various promises to improve its practices. One of Apple's responses was to move some of its business away from Foxconn to Pegatron, a Taiwanese electronics manufacturing company that mainly assembled the iPhone 4, 4s, 5, and 5c, along with Apple's iPad. The company's factories were located in Taiwan, mainland China, the Czech Republic, and Mexico, while its customer service centres operated in the United States and Japan. Since it started producing Apple products in 2011, Pegatron showed remarkable increases in revenue.

In 2013, China Labor Watch (CLW), a U.S.-based NGO, whose mission was to increase the transparency of factory labour conditions in China, published *Apple's Unkept Promises*, a report based on an undercover investigation into working conditions at Pegatron factories. The situation was even more serious than at Foxconn. According to the report, three Pegatron factories in China had violated 86 Chinese regulations, including 36 legal and 50 ethical violations, ranging from use of a juvenile workforce, to violations of women's rights, excessive working hours, and environmental pollution. In response to the public disclosure of the report, Apple again promised its full dedication to addressing those issues. Jason Cheng, Pegatron's chief executive officer (CEO), also stated, "We will investigate the allegations fully and take immediate actions to correct any violations to Chinese labour laws and our own code of conduct."

Nonetheless, on December 19, 2014, the global news media again accused Apple and Pegatron, alleging that Apple had "broken its promises." The previous day, the influential BBC *Panorama* program had broadcast a documentary based on an undercover investigation of the actual practices and working conditions at a Shanghai factory owned by Pegatron. A variety of poor practices were exposed. For example, workers had to hand in their identification cards before entering the factory, were given no basic health and safety training, and had to work excessive hours — up to 16 hours a day, which would sometimes continue for 18 consecutive days. According to the documentary, workers' requests for a day off were routinely ignored. Another scene in the documentary showed workers who could not help but fall asleep in the middle of a busy production line. The quality of life outside the factory was also criticized. Dormitories were overcrowded, and consisted of nothing but 12 tiny beds placed end to end.

Apple did not comment on camera for the BBC documentary, but the next day, Jeff Williams clearly expressed what he and Apple CEO, Tim Cook, felt about the documentary. Their "deeply offended" feelings were delivered to the 5,000 U.K. Apple employees in the form of a letter, which became public when it was published by the *Daily Telegraph*. In the letter, Williams said, "We know of no other company doing as much as Apple does to ensure fair and safe working conditions, to discover and investigate problems, to fix and follow through when issues arise, and to provide transparency into the operations of our suppliers."

CSR CHALLENGES

Apple retained firm control to ensure it could deliver on this promise, but when it came to supply chain management, an approach of simplification could have its limitations. Given the global nature of Apple's supply chain, the various products it produced, and the technological complexity of these products, Apple needed to work with a wide array of suppliers. To fulfill its "promise," Apple needed to be aware of and appropriately manage all these relationships. Doing so raised various challenges.

Some of these challenges related to the various formal and informal national institutional regimes that applied to various offshore locations. Apple and its suppliers operated in very different cultural, legal, political, social, and economic environments. For example, its two key suppliers, Foxconn and Pegatron, conducted their manufacturing operations mostly in mainland China. The top 200 suppliers on Apple's supplier list were scattered around the world, ranging from Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, through to Ireland and the Czech Republic.²⁶ As much as Apple may have wanted to make complex things simple, it could not

single-handedly change these diverse national environments to suit its own purposes. Apple and its suppliers faced completely different stakeholders with different expectations. Apple needed to deal with high expectations from consumers, employees, investors, NGOs, and governments in the United States and other developed countries, while most of the suppliers were located in emerging countries that had much lower expectations and different social values and norms.

Another challenge arose from differences in the companies' objectives, particularly their objectives in terms of CSR. However, because of Apple's huge size, stock market value, visibility, and (partly self-created) image, it faced more scrutiny than perhaps any company in the world. Writing in *alphr*, Barry Collins argued:

Apple doesn't outright deny any of those allegations. Yet, it does pose the question: why pick on us? . . . It's not the only tech company using cheap labour in Asian factories: in fact, show me one that isn't. Panorama could equally have substituted Apple for Microsoft, Samsung, Sony, or even a British firm such as Tesco, which has its Hudl³⁸ tablets made in the same factories as Apple does. Picking on Apple because it's the only company that's made a public commitment to improving worker welfare seems a little perverse.³⁹

Simon Rockman of *The Register* commented, "while Apple may well be right . . . the difference lies in the gap between what the richest company in the world has said it would do, and what it has achieved in reaching the standards it set for itself."

According to Brad Reed:

The point of all this isn't to say that Apple is an "evil" company or that anyone should feel guilty buying an iPhone or a Mac. I'm also not calling on Apple to pull manufacturing operations out of China since I know how important these jobs are to people who work at them.

However, there's nothing wrong with insisting that our favourite companies — whether we're talking Apple, Samsung or Google — do better on issues of worker treatment, especially when they've repeatedly vowed to do so. Apple makes insane profit margins on its iPhones and it can certainly afford to commit more resources for ensuring that the people who manufacture them aren't forced to work 18 days in a row.

Reed's comments in fact seemed to resonate with the company itself because even Williams mentioned in his letter that Apple "can still do better."

APPLE AND OFFSHORE OUTSOURCING

"Designed by Apple in California" and "Assembled in China," read a statement imprinted on the back of Apple's iPhones and iPads and on the bottom of its Mac products, neatly capturing Apple's strategy of offshore outsourcing. It was estimated that around 90 per cent of the iPhone's parts were manufactured overseas.

Apple's sophisticated supply chain offered the needed flexibility to meet fluctuating demand. Just before the debut of the first iPhone in 2007, Steve Jobs realized that the screen material needed be changed from plastic to glass so it would not get scratched. He was quoted as saying, "*I want a glass screen. . . . I want it perfect in six weeks.*"

While no American company could produce the glass screens in a month, a Chinese company was able to make them. To meet Apple's last-minute changes and orders, thousands more workers were needed overnight, leading to work shifts being increased at short notice. As put by Jennifer Rigoni, Apple's former

worldwide supply demand manager, “They [the suppliers] could hire 3,000 people overnight. . . . What U.S. plant can find 3,000 people overnight and convince them to live in dorms?”

It also helped that wages in the Chinese factories were very low. According to CLW’s 2013 report, the base wage of Pegatron factory workers in Shanghai was the equivalent of approximately \$1.50 per hour. The same report disclosed that most workers wanted to leave the factory after having experienced such harsh working conditions. In one of the Pegatron factories, AVY in Suzhou, more than a quarter of the new workers left within a two-week period.

Offshore outsourcing might have significantly reduced Apple’s operating costs. At the same time, however, it also decreased Apple’s level of control and monitoring over manufacturing processes and practices.

Although Apple prepared codes of conduct and enforced its suppliers to comply with those standards, in the absence of day-to-day monitoring, compliance was difficult to ensure. Of course, this problem was faced not only by Apple; Samsung and other smartphone producers often sourced from these same factories. But doing so represented a fundamental trade-off that any such firm would need to deal with.

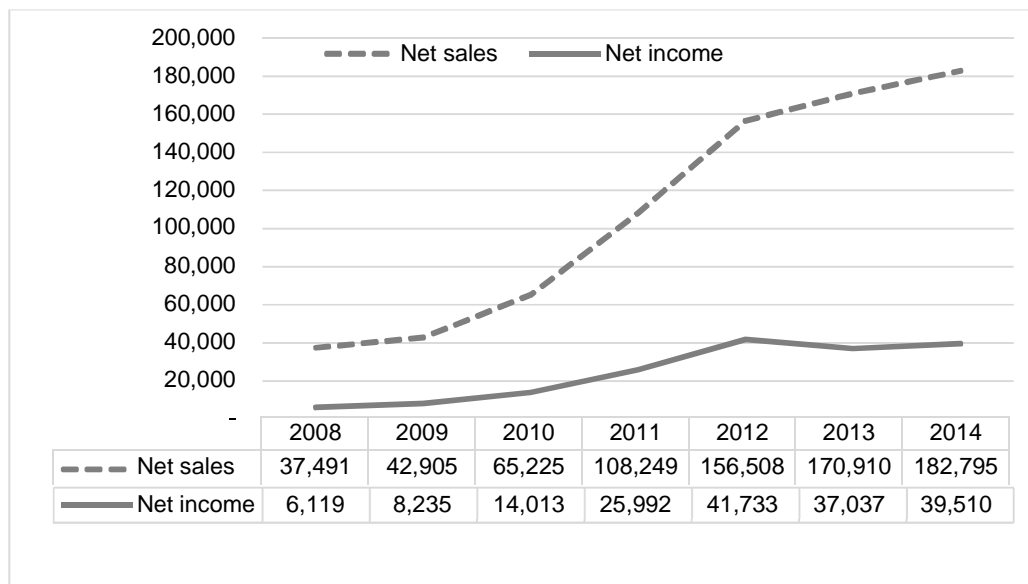
SHOULD APPLE CARE?

The CSR failures did not seem to affect Apple’s business performance. In 2015, it topped the *Forbes* list of “The World’s Most Valuable Brands,” and ranked 12th in the “Global 2000” list, and 55th among America’s Best Employers.⁵⁹ Furthermore, it still had unshakable customer loyalty that did not seem to have been negatively affected by the alleged socially irresponsible actions of its key suppliers. This situation invited the question: How much should Apple really care about socially irresponsible actions of its suppliers?

THE ROAD AHEAD -

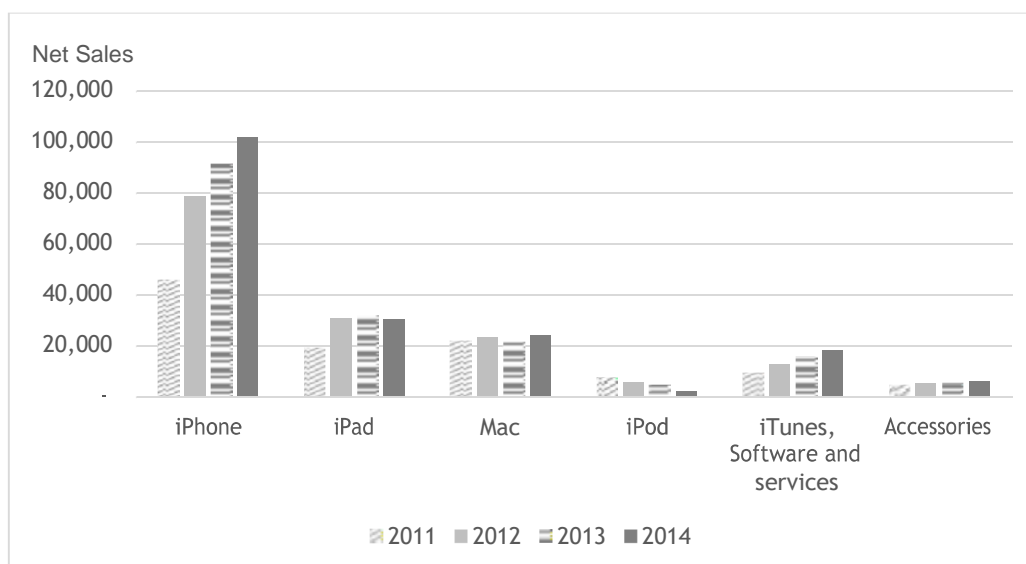
Given the circumstances, Apple and Williams still had several options available. But what option would give Apple the best outcomes? Should Apple continue as it was and take for granted the occasional bit of negative publicity? The company had perhaps already done more than its fair share to tackle CSR problems in its supply chain. On the other hand, maybe Apple could, and should, do more to tackle what had turned out to be a complex issue. Should Apple seek to work more to improve working conditions, such as by working with NGOs and transnational organizations? Should it engage in even more monitoring? Perhaps it could even go so far as to bring production in-house, in an attempt to regain control. A more radical solution would be to bring manufacturing back to the United States, which might become possible in the future, given increased levels of automation and robotization. But how would such changes affect Apple’s profit margins — and perhaps even more importantly, would Apple’s many customers in China respond negatively to such a move?

EXHIBIT 1: APPLE'S NET SALES AND NET INCOME, 2008–2014 (IN US\$ MILLIONS)



Source: Apple Inc., "Form 10-K: For the Fiscal Year Ended September 27, 2014," EDGAR Online, accessed December 17, 2015.

EXHIBIT 2: APPLE'S NET SALES BY PRODUCT, 2011–2014 (IN US\$ MILLIONS)



Source: Apple Inc., "Form 10-K: For the Fiscal Year Ended September 27, 2014," EDGAR Online, accessed December 17, 2015.

ASSIGNMENT

Divide into groups and discuss the following points related to the case. Then, insert what emerged by discussion in a power point and briefly present the results.

1. Identify the multiple risks emerged for APPLE from its supply-chain management. Identify the interests of the different stakeholders, and risks at the base of impacts on business
2. Evaluate the adequateness of strategies of insourcing as solution to overcome problems emerged in the case
3. Outline the trade-off emerging from the case between profit maximization and “doing good”
4. Taking into consideration the SA8000 standard, describe which requirements have been violated by suppliers, and which corrective actions should be implemented by APPLE for a correct responsible supply-chain management