

COMMUNICATION PLAN
DIESELGATE: THE VOLKSWAGEN EMISSION SCANDAL

SITUATION ANALYSIS

Background

Between 2004 and 2009, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency phased in tighter emission and NO_x (nitrogen dioxide) limits permitted by diesel vehicles. These regulations prompted automakers that sold diesel vehicles in the U.S. to alter their engines to comply with new standards (CAFEE, 2014). In 2006, V.W. engineers began to design a new diesel engine to meet U.S. emission standards that would take effect by the model year 2007 and marketed as "clean diesel." In 2008, Volkswagen launched a massive marketing campaign across North America with the tagline "Clean Diesel," advertising that they have discovered a way to make diesel engines more environmentally friendly. Diesel is known for contributing high pollution into the air, specifically NO_x, which can contribute to the amount of smog produced and cause harmful health effects for individuals exposed. The announcement and innovation of "clean diesel" took the market and stakeholders by surprise, but everyone felt a sense of ease knowing that there was finally an environmentally safe diesel vehicle option that was "sustainable, reliable, and successful."

In 2011, the European Commission's Joint Research Centre conducted a research study on diesel vehicles in Germany to compare the level of emissions measured in a lab testing setting versus on the road in normal conditions. The findings stated that the level of NO_x emitted was up to 14 times the E.U. limit. Shortly after the study from the JRC was published, Martin Winterkorn, the CEO of Volkswagen, took to the stage at the Volkswagens new green plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, to announce his plans to more than triple Volkswagons sales in the U.S. within a decade, surpassing Toyota, and becoming the world's largest automaker. He planned on achieving that goal by betting on diesel-powered cars promising high mileage, low emissions, and the same powerful performance (Hakim, Kessler, and Ewing, 2015). Following these events, a team of researchers at West Virginia University were intrigued by the innovation presented by V.W. and wanted to test U.S. diesel vehicles to see if they could share solutions for lower emissions with other automakers.

The International Council of Clean Transportation contracted the Center for Alternative Fuels, Engines and Emissions (CAFEE) at West Virginia University to conduct a study on three light-duty diesel vehicles on U.S. road conditions using a PERM measuring tool to compare the emission output to the cars tested by the Joint Research Center in Europe. On May 14, 2014, the ICCT presented their research findings to the California Air Resources Board (CARB) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), showing that Volkswagen's "Clean Diesel" vehicles, were not in fact, as clean as they claimed to be. While the ICCT was expecting to find U.S. vehicles emitted lower emission outputs in compliance with EPA limits, they discovered the latter, with the Volkswagen Jetta and Volkswagon Other emitting up to 40 times the EPA emission standard and producing more NO_x than declared on standard EPA emission testings

(CAFEE, 2014). As a result, the CARB and EPA launched their investigation into what is now known as Dieselgate.

Is this situation unique or reoccurring for the organization?

While we would hope Volkswagen would learn their lesson the first time around, it appears this situation is recurring for the organization. This isn't Volkswagen's first encounter with EPA regulators because of emissions with minor differences. When the United States began regulating pollutants from tailpipes in the 1970s, Volkswagen was one of the first companies to use defeat device technology that shut down the vehicles pollution control system to cheat the emission tests. Volkswagen got off easy in 1973 with a fine of \$120,000 which translates to only \$747,538 today ([Hakim](#), [Kessler](#), and [Ewing](#), 2015).

What causes have led to the situation?

It seems easy to get caught up in the automaker competition and search for loopholes around regulations, but for the Dieselgate scandal specifically, company culture was a leading cause of the defective devices designed and implemented. Former executives of V.W. stated that CEO Martin Winterkorn fostered a climate of fear and authoritarian practices to uphold the "no-failure" reputation. The culture designed prompted cheating and scandal by discouraging open dialog and limiting checks and balances ([Glazer](#), 2016). For example, Hanno Jelden, who prosecutors state was in charge of developing the illegal defeat device software, stated that he informed superiors about the software but felt pressured to stay silent ([Waldersee](#), 2021).

What are the facts associated with the situation?

- In 2006, V.W. engineers began to design "clean diesel" to meet U.S. emission standards that would take effect by the model year 2007
- When the diesel engine did not meet the NOx emission standards and attract sufficient customer demand in the U.S. market, V.W. management decided they would use a software function to cheat standard U.S. emission tests.
- V.W. engineers designed software that recognized when a vehicle was undergoing standard U.S. emission testing on a dynamometer or if it was on the road under normal conditions
- If the vehicle's software detected it was in test mode, the car performed in a mode that satisfied the U.S. NOx emission standards. If the vehicles were not in test mode, they would operate differently, at which emission control systems reduced substantially, leading to NOx emissions up to 40 times higher than the U.S. standard.
- In 2014, V.W. engineers perfected the cheating software to reduce hardware failures and lead U.S. regulators, U.S. customers, and others to believe it was a software update intended to improve durability and emission issues.

- The West Virginia University's Center for Alternative Fuels, Engines, and Emissions published the study results commissioned by the ICCT in March 2014
- The ICCT research identified substantial discrepancies in the NOx emissions from certain V.W. vehicles when tested on the road compared to EPA and CARB standard drive cycle tests.
- V.W. employees including Heinz-Jakob Neusser, Gottweis, Schmidt, and Peter hid the software from U.S. regulators, U.S. customers, and U.S. public
- Following the ICCT study, CARB and the EPA attempted to work with V.W. to determine the cause of the higher NOx emissions in the V.W. diesel vehicles.
- Neusser, Gottweis, Schmidt, and Peter provided the EPA and CARB with false testing results, data, presentations, and statements attempting to appear innocent and blaming a mechanical and technological problem in the research for 18 months obstructing the regulators try to uncover the truth.
- On September 18, 2015, the EPA accused Volkswagen AG of cheating emission tests by using a defeat device installed in their vehicle software.
- On September 22, Volkswagen admitted to installing the software and claimed it reduced emission results during lab testing.
- Worldwide, 11 million diesel engines were equipped with the defeat device, 590,000 of those sold in the U.S.

Consequences

Six years later, and damage is still rolling in. On September 23, CEO Martin Winterkorn stepped down but insisted he knew nothing of the scam, stating, "I am shocked by the past few days' events. I am stunned that misconduct on such a scale was possible in the Volkswagen Group. As CEO, I accept responsibility for the irregularities. I am doing this in the company's interest even though I am not aware of any wrongdoing on my part" (Dooley, 2018)

The V.W. shares took a 40 percent plunge within two days following the events. In June 2016, Volkswagen paid **\$14.7 billion** in buybacks, compensation, and penalties in the U.S. settlements, including cash payouts to nearly 500,000 U.S. drivers. In January 2017, the V.W. pleaded guilty to three U.S. charges, including fraud, paying **\$4.3 billion** in fines. In addition, V.W. signs up to a "Statement of Facts," which admits that the cheating dates back to 2006. Following in February of 2017 came a motion for V.W. to pay \$1.2 billion in compensations to 80,000 U.S. buyers.

Bosch car parts designer, who supplied software elements, paid nearly **\$330 million** to U.S. car owners and dealers but declined responsibility in wrongdoing.

Shortly after, in December, V.W. executive Oliver Schmidt was arrested and sentenced to seven years in jail. While 2017 was a lousy year for executives and employees facing the consequences, surprisingly, the V.W. profit rose back swiftly from record sales in 2017, with sales being 1.9% higher than the previous year, although legal matters were still in the making. In May of 2018, the previous CEO, Martin Winterkorn, was indicted in the U.S. accused of fabricating cheating, followed by V.W. paying a 1 billion euro fine in Germany admitting to the responsibility of the diesel crisis.

Consequences follow for the CEO of V.W.'s Saudi subsidiary, Rupert Stadler, in correlation with fraud charges, and a shareholders case in Germany opens in September claiming nine billion euros of damages. The Audi division agreed to pay 800 million euros in Germany. Soon after, other companies are held accountable. Fiat Chrysler paid a \$515 million settlement in the U.S. for its use of defeat devices. BMW gets fined 8.5 million euros over high diesel emission output but fails to uncover criminal wrongdoing. Porsche paid a 535 million euro fine in Germany, and Daimler paid 870 million euros in fines.

In 2020, V.W. will pay another **750 million euros** to compensate 235,000 German customers. VW CEO Herbert Diess and supervisory board avoid trial over market manipulation and agrees to a 9 million euro settlement. The German court then ordered V.W. to buy back a rigged diesel from its owner. The investigation continues into the French and U.K. branches, and consequences continue today (E.T. Auto, 2021).

How critical is the situation to the organization's mission and vision?

In 2009, Volkswagen launched a massive marketing campaign around North America, claiming they have engineered "Clean Diesel," which imposed less toxic pollutants to the environment. While at this time, it seemed the organization's mission and vision were to provide a clean diesel option and benefit the customers and the environment, new data shows that the only mission and image of the organization was to be the leading automaker company before Toyota. In doing so, Volkswagen was willing to cheat the system to be number 1 in the automaker industry with customer and stakeholders value not taken into consideration. Volkswagen does not have a clear organizational mission or deals upheld in the company (Skeet, 2015).

How does the situation impact the organization's bottom line?

Since the confession of defeat devices in 2015, Volkswagen has paid **\$40 billion** in fines, buybacks, and legal fees for the Volkswagen Group. Regardless of this large amount due for their

crimes and collusion, long term, Dieselgate has not put a considerable dent in Volkswagen's bottom line. In 2020, Volkswagen generated nearly \$14 billion (O'Kane, 2021).

Predictions and Trends

While Volkswagen is still taking the hit six years later from their unethical actions and pollution to the environment, the future looks bright for their investments in electric vehicles. While Dieselgate was a turning point of events where the manufacturing and sales of all diesel vehicles halted, V.W. announced that they have now embarked on \$86.4 billion to develop future technologies between 2021 and 2025. As a result, by 2030, half of V.W. sales expect to be from battery-electric vehicles, and by 2040, almost 100% of their new cars should be zero-emission vehicles which could mean that V.W. could be the global E.V. leader, as they have the current advantage in Europe with local manufacturing, brand familiarity, and a cheaper price point (Brigham, 2021).

Is the situation and opportunity or an obstacle that must be overcome? If an obstruction, how might it be turned into an opportunity?

It has now been six years since the detection of the defeat device, and the consequences are still occurring. This scandal is an obstacle to overcome for the sustainability of the Volkswagen Group in general. However, this poses a substantial opportunity. While Volkswagen is moving away from diesel engines that emit high amounts of NOx, they are investing more into electric vehicles that can pass EPA standards and talk lower emission outputs. V.W. also announced that they will be developing three software platforms intending to create one software platform that can be used across all Volkswagen Cars by 2025, which could become a significant source of income as it expects to have 40 million vehicles operating off the group's platform by 2030 (Taylor, 2021)

SITUATION RESOLUTION

Might information (quality, quantity) affect how the situation is resolved?

With ongoing investigations and legal proceedings continuing to arise six years after the confession of the defeat devices, the quality of information revealed is going to be crucial in closing this scandal and moving on. Dieselgate is a global issue with many countries and regulating organizations involved. Unfortunately, Volkswagen has not necessarily been cooperative and straightforward with their confessions, affecting the quantity of just how big the scandal is and how many employees were involved. At this point, transparency, integrity, and remorse could positively impact the overall integrity of Volkswagen and their image to their stakeholders.

How might the situation be resolved to the mutual benefit of all parties involved?

Unfortunately, no matter how you look at this scandal, every area of the world that allowed V.W. diesel vehicles between 2009 and 2015 affected every individual who lived in that area, every employee who worked for V.W., and every competitor setting false expectations of success in the industry. It is hard to see how the situation becoming resolved would mutually benefit any parties, as they were innocent victims of the scandal in the first place. V.W. can offer buybacks and compensation in money form for the fiscal damage they caused; however, they can never reverse the amount of NOx and emissions released into the environment that has detrimental effects on the health of humans and the ecosystem. Volkswagen will need to move into a direction on a corporate and integral level implementing plans to provide better options and greater transparency to gain the trust of their stakeholders and customers again.

What priority do you feel management gives this situation?

With understanding, this scandal stemmed from the very leadership that Volkswagen employees and stakeholders relied on for reliable, transparent, honest innovations; the new management plays a highly crucial role in preventing a situation like this from ever happening again.

From investigations conducted, it was clear that company culture did not foster a safe environment for integrity, transparency, and doing the right thing overall. Management's greatest priority from here on out should be on the cultivation of a

ANALYZE THE ORGANIZATION

Internal environment

1. What is the nature of the product or services provided by the organization?

Volkswagen is one of the world's largest automaker companies known for providing diesel-powered engines that offer reliability, affordability, and power behind the wheel. The name Volkswagen translates to the people's car, and loyal members of the brand have upheld Volkswagens success and brand reputation. However, in discovering the dieselgate scandal, investigations revealed that Volkswagen contained a toxic world culture that didn't harness integrity and cultivated deceit. The first Volkswagen Bug was designed under the Hitler Regime for Nazi soldiers to have better means of transportation, and the flawless authoritarian ruling trickled down into the leadership years after. This leadership eventually led to the decision to implement the defeat devices, then continue to deny any knowledge of it happening. When multiple employees were interviewed and questioned, it was clear that the internal environment was cutthroat and fearful of consequences when admitting to the awareness of scandals.

1. Over the last three years, has the product or service improved or diminished?

Over the last three years, Volkswagen has taken significant strides to improve its image, company culture, and relationship with its stakeholders after the defeat device scandal. Since then, they have implemented a whistleblower hotline and compliance officers in each division, urging employees to share any information and integrity training and cultivation to ensure

employees follow moral standards when challenged with deceit (Sun and Hagel, 2020). Implementing this multipronged transformation is necessary to help prevent another scandal and restore V.W.'s reputation. One of the greatest motivations for infrastructural changes is a price tag on noncompliance: almost 40 billion euros in fines, penalties, and compensation to customers.

Volkswagon settled with the U.S Justice Department in 2017, pleading guilty to criminal charges and agreeing to pay billions of dollars in penalties (Iwano, 2020). In addition, an independent corporate compliance monitor was appointed by the U.S. authorities to oversee Volkswagens overall compliance. Their collaborative goal as a company now is to focus on long-term, sustainable change, including more transparency, open-discussion environments, and greater tolerance of errors and accountability.

External environment

The external environment for Volkswagen is ever changing, especially with stricter laws surrounding environmental efforts. While the setting is growing with innovations and technology, Volkswagen is now entering an industry they are relatively new to and will take some navigating to get used to and market to their customers. As far as environmental regulations go on emission outputs from country to country, it is truly unpredictable. Data from the previous year will set goals to maintain; however, the automobile industry is trying to move away from diesel and petroleum and provide electronic energy-efficient options that benefit consumers and the environment.

The largest groups that exist and hinder the organization would be the NGOs that regulate the emission and NOx standards. Especially after the dieselgate scandal, regulators will be on the lookout for loopholes and shortcuts that had once pierced the veil they thought was unpredictable. Economic origins are in a strong position with Volkswagen based in Germany; however, Volkswagen will have to alter the manufacturing at their green branch in Texas to switch to electronic vehicle manufacturing or continue clean diesel research.

ANALYZE STAKEHOLDERS

Volkswagen has a 2 tier system when it comes to its stakeholders. The first tier is internal stakeholders such as automotive services and financial services. The second tier is external stakeholders such as capital markets, customers, partners, and society. Naturally, their effect on sales and revenue prioritizes stakeholders, so the stakeholders that exert the most power in this situation are investors, customers, and government authorities.

Investors are the support system for the continued advancements and innovation in new technology that can keep your product relevant. In Volkswagons's situation, investors need to know they can rely on Volkswagen again to deliver transparent information that won't harm their

shares and stake in the company. Customers are the most important because they yield how many vehicles sell annually. Government authorities are also equally important since they control and demand the regulations and standards without fraudulent behaviors.

Volkswagen hasn't caught a break with the ongoing consequences of the Delegate Scandal that happened nearly six years ago. However, media is reporting more on other automobile manufacturers also being held accountable and Volkswagens's great dive into electric vehicle design and manufacturing. The U.S Justice Department is well familiar with Volkswagen now and is well-versed in the structure and economics of how Volkswagen will move forward. The EPA, CARB, and U.S Justice Department will keep close tabs on Volkswagen manufacturing and sales and other motor vehicles regarding emission standards and NOx limits.

The hardest stakeholder to gain trust trickles down to the Volkswagen employees. 600,000 Volkswagen employees were affected by the blow and had to prepare for a complete restructuring of company culture and regulations. Since Volkswagen fostered a toxic culture, Volkswagen had to re-evaluate the support options they provided for their employees and then get them to trust them with utilizing them. For example, Volkswagen implemented a whistleblower program, but feedback showed it wasn't very employee-friendly. The company then changed the structure of the whistleblower program to be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in 19 languages and enables more than 90% of the company's employees to report tips in their native language (Sun and Hagel, 2020).

Regarding the communities surrounding the organization's mission, values, and activities, Volkswagen needs to prove more efforts to compensate all customers affected worldwide by this scandal to build back trust and support from customers. While sales have shown that Volkswagen is still succeeding economically, more people are aware of V.W.s immoral actions and feel entitled to repayment for the deceit and destruction the scandal caused.

Volkswagon has outlined the stakeholder expectations and responses the company is taking to match the integrity, compliance, and corporate responsibility promised. In a breakdown of action areas, the answers cover decarbonization, workforce transformation, circular economy, and upholding social responsibility being transparent and authentic to their statements.

STRATEGIC AND TACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Volkswagen has had nearly six years to clean up its mess, but this is a continued work to wield any risk of future scandals and continued success in an innovative, environmentally friendly direction. While we can't go back and fix the path V.W. chose to take with noncompliance with the EPA and nondisclosure of vital information to the scandal's structure and depth, we can input strategic incentives and create alliances to gain a brighter future.

The first action V.W. should be taking to eliminate any risk of repeating this situation is implementing checks and balances into the V.G. management team, specifically for the CEO and other executives. With detailed reports disclosing that a toxic work culture led to the scandal slipping through the fingers of so many regulators, it is of the utmost importance to inform the executive team that change and progress start from the top, not at the bottom. Furthermore, they need to be informed by the P.R. team of the vast importance it is to cultivating a healthy work environment for all employees. In addition, Volkswagen should form strategic alliances and partnerships with environmental agencies to balance out the contribution of pollutants to the background and continue their innovations in electronic vehicles.

What strategic message(s) should the organization adopt (content)?

The most vital strategic message that V.W. should be adopting is messaging around transparency with stakeholders and investments in a cleaner, environmentally safe future. In addition, the organization should continue to hold press conferences, tradeshow, and advertising/promotional events to reiterate the changes Volkswagen is making on a fundamental level that trickles down to benefit customers and the public.

Both logical and emotional appeals should be used, admitting their wrongdoings, lies, deceits, and structurally explaining the company culture and motives. Examples are:

Throughout our company's most significant trials and lowest point, we are proud to announce that Volkswagons renewed vision and goals are around environmentally safe innovations and the achievement of an affordable, reliable, durable V.W. electric vehicle for our consumers.

Volkswagen may have lost its way for the environment, but we never lost our way for the people. Therefore, we are now presenting a vehicle for the people AND the environment, the Volkswagon ID.4.

What message tactics should be used?

While the crisis has almost averted since the scandal, this will be known as one of the largest automobile scandalous frauds in history, further enforcing continued messaging tactics. In the future, in the face of trial and tribulation, V.W. should utilize:

- Trade Shows
- Pressrooms and Media Relations
- Brand Ambassador Programs
- Advertising and Promotional Events
 - Ensuring they are honest and transparent with the current innovations

EVALUATION

1. Outputs

Volkswagens communication tactics to reach their target audience, including customers, investors, and communities. Therefore, the first measurement of these efforts will be the quality and transparency of the message. For example, Volkswagen's efforts to deceive Americans of clean diesel left a large discrepancy in Volkswagen's brand image and trust. In addition, messaging efforts will strive to provide target audiences with real-time updates and information on innovations and new technology.

- Conducting research and results on innovations and presenting those findings
- Internal benchmarking with goals and progress
- Rebranding and corporate reputation - Have messaging efforts changed the way stakeholders think and feel about environmentally safe options?

1. Outtakes

Volkswagen wants to portray a better corporate image in the long run, not just short term. What should the outcome of the brand image be? What is the overall impression they want to portray?

- While still providing affordable diesel engines, Volkswagen adopts innovations in more environmentally friendly directions.
- While the Dieselgate scam displayed divulsion in the companies history, what benefits and opportunities came out of the resolution?
- Volkswagen has always wanted to make affordable, reliable, powerful vehicles for the people. Safer environmental are proactively for the people.

1. Outcomes

Volkswagen's customer base is loyal to diesel fuel engines and high-powered vehicles at a low cost. So how does transferring into electronic cars affect the target audience's demand?

- Receive feedback from customers and stakeholders to measure the efficiency of their environmental transition
- Measure ROI on the new ID.4
- Evaluate endorsements and ambassadors to see if the goals match up

Strategic Objectives

While this scandal resulted from a strategic objective to cheat the emission testing system, corporations can experience unpredictable crises. If there is anything we've learned from the Volkswagen Scandal, it's how not to prolong vital information from government organizations and be proactive in the repair process versus the defense process.

The most important strategic objective is to own up to the shortcoming and seek resolution immediately. When the research team in Germany first detected the Volkswagen diesel emission

tests, messaging should have been at the forefront of the news and solutions explored. In this scandal, Volkswagen first led the EPA to believe that there was nothing wrong with their emission output levels, but instead with the EPA's research. This lead went on for 18 months, which created an emotional and organizational frustration from the EPA ensuring the repair process would be long and hard. The second issue with this scandal is that the CEO, Martin Wilehorn, announced his awareness of the findings but denied all claims of his knowledge of the deceit devices and any responsibility for installing them. For Volkswagen, any future scandals or new release of information should be directly handled by the CEO, immediately assuming responsibility for the situation and providing a resolution plan. Another key strategic objective is to launch a corporate investigation into the findings directly, leaving no trail left behind, to discover any information that might be revealed to the public later, so you can thoroughly form messaging around the awareness and resolution.

What are some problems posed with the evaluation of your plan? How can they be overcome?

Problems may arise when the very CEO that is assumed to take responsibility was also the same person to implement and suggest the deceiving strategy in the first place. Corporate corruption, blinding employees in the process, and subjecting everyone to greater risk and loss are hazards. To meet strategic objectives, messaging needs to be communicated clearly and concisely, so much so that the deliverer of the message believes in the approach themselves. If any underlying factors contribute to the overall picture not being communicated, the very structure of the objective can crumble, leaving the company with another mess to clean up.

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