

Research on Communication Strategy of Refusing Animal Performance Concept in Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo Based on STEPPS Model

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Abstract. To change the phenomenon of making profits from animal performances and causing harm to animals, Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo took the lead in proposing to cancel animal performances. The zoo has gradually attracted many visitors with the concept of refusing animal performances and has developed into a popular tourist attraction. Studying how Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo attracts visitors and arouses discussion with the idea of refusing animal performances is of great significance to the development of animal exhibition areas in China and even the world. The particularity of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo inspires the establishment of nationwide word-of-mouth. In this study, the STEPPS model is used to analyze how Nanjing Hongshan Forest wins word-of-mouth and gets out of trouble through the communication strategy of refusing animal performances and focuses on five principles of the model (there are six principles in total) to put forward suggestions for the future development of the zoo. The study has reference significance for the development of other zoos and animal-related institutions, and it can promote the protection of more animals in China and even the world to a certain extent.

Keywords: Animal Performance, Communication Strategy, Word-of-Mouth, Zoo.

1. Introduction

In recent years, protecting animals has been a hot topic; protecting animals is protecting human beings. However, many zoos still use animal performances to attract customers and profit from them. Animal performances destroy the nature of animals and even endanger their lives, which is unfair to the animals. Xiao & Zhang found that from 2011 to 2012, among more than 40 zoos in China, 91% of wildlife parks, 89% of aquariums, and 50% of urban zoos had various animal performances [1]. One thing that makes Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo very different from these zoos is that it was the first zoo in China to cancel animal performances, and it set a precedent through which it gradually developed into a popular tourist attraction in recent years. Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo attracts visitors and arouses discussion with the idea of refusing animal performances, which is of great significance to developing various animal exhibition areas in China and the world.

Shen used the SWOT analysis method to analyze the development strategy of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo and concluded that the advantages of the zoo's development include convenient transportation, complete supporting equipment, pleasant climatic conditions, rich flora and fauna in the park, a long history, and sufficient tourists. Its disadvantages include incomplete park structure, outdated infrastructure, few species with local characteristics, and imperfect management mechanisms. Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo should pay close attention to and study the development trend of the domestic and international zoo industry and adhere to the scientific concept of development [2]. The study systematically analyzed all the development strategies of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo, which is similar to the research direction of this paper, but ignored the communication strategy of refusing animal performances.

Ye found that the popularity of Hongshan Forest Zoo is not accidental; the zoo's ticket price has been unchanged for many years, and the cancellation of animal performances and the cancellation of the policy of selling animal feed for visitors have not only made the zoo popular but also greatly increased the happiness of animals, and zoos like Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo need society [3]. The study analyzed the popularity of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo with the ultimate aim of exploring

the needs of society and found the role of its communication strategy of rejecting animal performances.

Liu analyzed the living situation and background knowledge of animals that need to show performances to people, interpreted the drawbacks of animal performances from the perspective of ecological ethics, and found that the starting point and purpose of zoo management construction are inseparable from the new ethical knowledge of respecting animal rights [4]. This study investigated the disadvantages of animal performances on the development of zoos, which explained the harm of animal performances on the future development of zoos and the formation of word-of-mouth from the opposite direction of the research problem in this paper to explain better the effect of the communication strategy of canceling animal performances on the word-of-mouth marketing of Nanjing Hongshan Zoo.

Through the above literature review, it can be found that most of the articles mainly studied the development strategy of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo, the reasons for its popularity, and put forward suggestions for the future development of the zoo. Other studies have studied the negative effects of animal performances on the development of zoos and pointed out that zoos cannot be achieved without respecting and protecting animals. However, few scholars have conducted in-depth research on the establishment of reputation and the benefits of its development based on the communication strategy of refusing animal performances in Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo and put forward corresponding future development directions and suggestions.

This study will start with the friendly treatment of animals and a clear rejection of animal performances at Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo. It will use the STEPPS model to analyze the establishment of the zoo's word-of-mouth and provide suggestions for its future development. First, this study will analyze the communication strategy of refusing animal performances in Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo. In this part, the paper will explore the reasons for the zoo's refusal of animal performances, the implementation and development of this strategy, and the current state of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo after the effective implementation of this strategy. Secondly, this study will use the six principles of the STEPPS model to conduct a detailed analysis of the communication strategy of rejecting animal performances at Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo and mainly analyze the significance and existing problems of this communication strategy for establishing the zoo's word-of-mouth. Finally, this paper will summarize the results of the previous part of the study and put forward the corresponding suggestions on the problems in the communication strategy of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo to refuse animal performances.

2. Case Description

The director of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo originally proposed to cancel the animal performances not to attract more customers and make money but to provide a good living environment for more animals, where they can maintain their nature and experience the world in the way they want. From the protection of animals and animals having a living environment to maintain their nature and happy growth, it has created a precedent in zoos, and its particularity has inspired the establishment of its word-of-mouth across the country. The development of the zoo after the cancellation of the animal performances was not smooth. As it is the only zoo in China that is a self-supporting public institution, more than 80% of its income comes from tickets. Affected by the epidemic after 2020 and attracted by no animal show, the zoo once fell into a dangerous situation [5]. After suffering a blow to its income, Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo still insists on refusing animal performances. It attracts people's attention by publishing videos on social platforms such as Douyin to publicize its concept of refusing animal performances and explain the meaning and implementation results of the concept (the animals in the video show their most real state). As more and more people went and described the living situation of the animals in the zoo on social media or to family and friends and confirmed what the zoo's official account showed, the profit returns became better. Many zoos in China promote themselves on social media to establish their reputation. To stand out among

the numerous zoos, Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo's strategy of refusing animal performances is special enough and in line with the STEPPS model. Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo has become one of the most popular zoos in China with this communication strategy.

3. Analysis on the Problem

The STEPPS model plays a role in how Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo gained a reputation and escaped adversity with its communication strategy of refusing animal performances. The STEPPS model can not only analyze the reasons why the communication strategy of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo has gained a reputation but also further point out problems and put forward opinions on the communication strategy of the zoo.

3.1. Introduction to the STEPPS Model

The STEPPS model is the six principles for making content (stories, news, products, ideas, information, and video) that Jonah Berger proposes in his book *Contagious*. These include social currency, triggers, emotion, public, practical value, and stories. Contagiosity is when content spreads from one person to another through word of mouth and social influence and is discussed or imitated by consumers, colleagues, and voters [6].

Social currency is the idea that consumers can make themselves look good by sharing products or ideas with others. Triggers are stimuli (a particular date, smell, etc.) that stimulate people to think about related things [6]. Companies wanting to create word of mouth must combine a product or idea with a trigger. Emotion refers to the ability to generate emotional reactions (such as anger, anxiety, excitement, etc.) that one is willing to share with a product or idea. Public means to make a product or idea publicly visible and cause people to think about why it is popular to build word of mouth. Practical value is making what the company wants to advertise seem useful, such as saving time, saving money, and so on. Stories are narratives in which a product or idea is disseminated as a story in which the product or idea is indispensable [6].

3.2. The Social Currency of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo

Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo's communication strategy of refusing animal performance gives people good social currency. Animal performance refers to animals experiencing long-term specific training to master some human skills such as cycling, jumping rope, or learning to drill fire rings and other dangerous activities, and these activities will surprise people. Just as people are willing to pay money to see wonderful movies or dramas, animal performances attract people to buy tickets to enter the zoo and watch the performances with their friends and family. Therefore, animal performances are one of the main means of making money for zoos. But behind the performance of animals is people's greed and cruelty to animals. The trainers often beat the animals because they do not obey the training or do not achieve the expected results, which will seriously affect the health of the animals and make them feel pain.

When Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo gave up the effective and direct means of making money by attracting visitors through animal performances and raised the banner of refusing animal performances, the zoo demonstrated its special treatment of animals, which also provided visitors with good animal ethics in the process of communicating with others.

When visitors mention Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo to others, they can talk about many topics, such as the animals in the zoo, the products on offer, and so on, but these only show the zoo and not visitors, so it does not inspire people to discuss the zoo with others. But when visitors talk to others about Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo's no-animal performance philosophy and what the zoo is doing, it makes them look good and builds the zoo's word-of-mouth. By showing the zoo's decision to cancel the zoo and sharing it with others, visitors can show that they support refusing animal performances and show their thoughts of treating animals in a friendly and fair way. This can make others feel the

kindness of visitors, which inspires visitors to share their experiences and feelings about visiting Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo with others.

3.3. Triggers of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo

Animal performance is a major trigger for Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo. Despite the growing rejection of animal performances in recent years, many venues in China still rely on animal performances to make money. Whenever people see animal performances in commercial places, zoos, or even streets that make money from animal performances, they can be associated with the Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo, which refuses animal performances. The Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo rejects animal performances, sharply contrasting the scenes of animal performances that people see. The visual impact of the animal performance scenes can remind people of the advanced nature of rejecting animal performances and the zoo that first proposed the idea in China, Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo, and inspire people to visit the zoo.

In addition, Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo also cooperates with Miha You, a well-known game brand in China, which is also a trigger for Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo. Li described that “Broken 3” is an action game officially released by Shanghai Mihayou Network Technology Co., Ltd. on October 14, 2016. Through the combination of anime, manga, and games, it shows the characteristics of two-dimensional mobile games and has obtained a considerable number of users in the early stage of release [7]. In 2023, “Broken 3” linked the concept of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo (refusing animal performances and protecting animals) to create a character in the game named Xier, who is kind and gentle. Since Mihayou has a significant number of users, these users will be exposed to the Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo and its concepts while playing the game.

3.4. Emotion Generated by Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo

Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo is the first zoo in China to cancel animal performances, and the idea has generated an emotional change in people to spark discussion. First of all, the zoo’s cancellation of animal performances surprised people. Animal performance is one of the important means of earning profits for the zoo, and the cancellation of it will bring difficulties to the zoo’s income to a certain extent. And people’s pleasure in visiting the zoo will be reduced if the animal performance is canceled. Many people cannot understand why the zoo does this, so they generate high-arousal emotions to discuss the reason with others. After finding out the reason, people will feel angry about the cruel story behind the animal performance, and anger is also a high-arousal emotion, inspiring people to discuss it with others. No matter what kind of emotional discussion people have, it is all related to the concept of rejecting animal performances in Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo. In this process, positive word-of-mouth for the zoo can be naturally established.

3.5. Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo Use the Principle of Public

The cultural and creative products of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo make the inconspicuous behavior of people entering the zoo to visit the zoo visible to inspire more people to know about and visit the zoo. After the situation of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo gradually improved, that is, more and more people paid attention to the zoo, the cultural and creative products launched by the zoo also quickly attracted a lot of people with feelings (support for the zoo’s concept of protecting animals and refusing animal performances). In Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo, there is a cultural and creative cabin and several carts selling cultural and creative products, and the zoo has also created an online mall selling cultural and creative products related to the zoo [8].

These cultural and creative products include doll pendants, postcards, turbans, T-shirts, etc., of the zoo’s distinctive animals, some of which can be seen by others, and some of which are more difficult for others to see (this is the problem with the zoo’s use of this principle). The products others can see can make visible the hidden behavior of people visiting Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo. In addition, the phenomenon of asking others to buy cultural and creative products of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo appeared on some second-hand online platforms (such as Xianyu, Zhuanzhuan, etc.) and social

media, which also made the invisible behavior of people loving Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo public [8]. Whether it is the phenomenon of more and more offline people owning cultural and creative products of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo or online purchasing, people who do not know or have never visited Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo can be curious about this zoo and want to explore why so many people like and support this zoo. This has brought the Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo and its philosophy of rejecting animal performances and protecting animal nature into public.

3.6. Practical Value of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo

Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo's preferential fare policy for special groups and the means of transportation for tourists are practical values provided by the zoo. Children under 1.40 meters tall and senior citizens 60 years old and above can enter the zoo free of charge, and college students with valid identification can enjoy a half-price discount. In addition, Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo provides visitors with a means of walking around the zoo. Using a means of walking tourists can not only save time but also save physical strength. People are willing to share news that can help others, and in the process, it also helps the marketing of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo.

3.7. Stories of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo

The story of how Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo eliminated animal performances and how the concept has developed to this day can bring word of mouth to the brand. The zoo's shift from the bleak beginnings of the no-show concept to its growing popularity and the no-show communications strategy's role in it are both bright and inaccessible parts of its brand story. No matter from which principle of social currency, triggers, emotion, public and practical value, the discussion can be led to the brand story of Nanjing Hongshan Zoo. In this story, Nanjing Hongshan Zoo is the protagonist and indispensable. So, it creates buzz for the zoo.

However, Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo lacks more attractive stories besides brand development stories, which can be used as a breakthrough to help its future marketing.

4. Suggestions

The above analysis shows that the concept of rejecting animal performances at Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo based on the STEPPS model has relevant marketing strategies, which have created word-of-mouth of the zoo and helped it come out of the predicament. However, the zoo has not fully applied every principle in the STEPPS model. Apart from the principle of social currency, the zoo has to revise or improve other principles.

4.1. Suggestions for Triggers at Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo

The existing triggers of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo can create a certain amount of word-of-mouth, but the scope is not very wide. Although the number of users who play Mihayou is large, it is not a large proportion of the total population of China. At the beginning of 2020, the average monthly active users of electronic games in China were 120.4 million [9]. Mihayou's user base is only a small fraction of that due to the large number of electronic games.), and the frequency of people seeing the animal perform is also low. For triggers to work better, the zoo needs to be combined with triggers that involve a wider range and occur more frequently. For example, Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo can cooperate with famous restaurant brands (such as McDonald's) to create an activity to help care for more wild and stray animals. McDonald's can set up channels to help, such as people buying a certain package of money to develop the love program. It can also make cartoon images of the featured animals or beloved animals of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo as billboards or stickers to decorate the stores to make the trigger more visible. A McDonald's store can also be set up in the Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo, but the store decoration should be different from that outside the zoo to be in line with the zoo style.

McDonald's are more frequent in people's lives and reach a wider range of people than Mihayou and other animal performances in the street or other zoos. By cooperating with McDonald's, Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo can make people think of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo and the zoo's concept of refusing animal performances and protecting animals when they see McDonald's icons to create wider word-of-mouth.

4.2. Suggestions for Further Generation of High-Arousal Emotions

Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo has now aroused word-of-mouth in high-arousal emotions (surprise and anger) over its advanced rejection of animal performances. However, Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo has not fully utilized the emotions generated by the cancellation of animal performances. Amplifying the anger generated by animal performances can stimulate more people to discuss the zoo and its ideals.

As mentioned above, during the epidemic period, Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo used social media such as Douyin to release the most real status of the animals in the zoo for more people to see. However, these videos all show the life of the animals, which is very plain and cannot excite high arousal emotions to excite discussion about the zoo and its ideals. Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo can make a video to show the cruel treatment of animals behind animal performances. The cruel treatment suffered by animals cannot be displayed solely in the form of words but rather in the presentation of real events to people. Posting the video on social media can amplify people's angry feelings about animal performances and stimulate discussion.

4.3. Suggestions for Solving the Existing Problem in the Principle of Public

Although Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo provides consumers with many cultural and creative products, some products are difficult to see by others, which does not conform to the principle of public in the STEPPS model. There are two suggestions for this.

If Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo wants to maintain sales of its original cultural and creative products, the zoo needs to provide consumers with bags to carry them. The bag should have the following characteristics: practical and durable (to ensure that people choose to use the bag in other situations where they need to use the bag), have the logo of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo (so that people can know the provenance of the bag), and have a prominent element (color or pattern, so that people can easily see the bag). When more and more people use the bag, people who do not know the Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo will be curious about the zoo.

In addition, Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo can also choose to establish offline product sales stores in places (or cities) outside the zoo, which can make the hidden behaviors of people like and support the Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo public. Because the cultural and creative products of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo have been sought after and loved by many people, many will buy in the offline store. When others see so many people patronizing these newly opened offline stores, they will become curious and imitate the behavior of people who enter the offline stores of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo to buy.

4.4. Suggestions to Increase the Practical Value

The zoo's current policy of saving money, events, and energy for people is long-term, and while it does have practical value, it is long-term, and so many people know about it, reducing people's desire to share it with others. Therefore, Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo should introduce low-frequency policies, such as irregular preferential activities for people to buy cultural and creative products in the zoo. Offering people, the activity three to five times a year, and not at a fixed time each year, can increase people's discussion of it. Because everyone learns that the zoo offers activities at different times, the earlier people know, the more they want to share their news with others, which can help Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo better use the principle of practical value.

4.5. Create Compelling Stories

The brand story of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo can inspire discussion regarding the concept of no animal performances, but it is not engaging and will not impress people. The zoo could refer to the funny panda cheese commercial (in which different people reject the panda cheese, and then a panda shows up and starts destroying things) and create an impressive and irresistible advertising video for the zoo to share with others [10]. But it is worth noting that the story shown in the advertisement video must have the existence of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo, and once people do not mention Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo, the story will not be told.

5. Conclusion

By using the STEPPS model to analyze the concept of refusing animal performances in Hongshan Forest Zoo in Nanjing, it can be found that the zoo uses the five principles of the model, but the zoo hardly makes full use of each principle. On that basis, the zoo's marketing strategy has plenty of room for improvement.

The concept of rejecting animal performances can make people look good during discussions with others, providing a good social currency for people. Both animal performances in other zoos or streets and the collaboration with the well-known game brand Mihayou are the triggers of the zoo. However, it has the problem of involving a relatively small scope and triggers less frequent discussions, and the zoo can collaborate with McDonald's or other well-known catering brands to fully utilize the principle of triggers. The concept of rejecting animal performances at Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo can stimulate people's high-arousal emotions. The zoo can amplify people's emotions by creating videos of the cruelty behind animal performances and stimulate more people to discuss the zoo's concept with others. The zoo also has corresponding long-term measures in the principle of practical value, but non-specific short-term activities can better stimulate people's desire to share useful information with others. Many people love the cultural and creative products of the zoo, but the zoo should make people's behavior of purchasing products in the zoo or online public (setting up offline stores or making bags containing cultural and creative products). The zoo can also produce interesting and attractive advertising videos based on the brand story.

This study has implications for the development of other zoos and other animal-related institutions, and they can follow the practice of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo and use the recommendations of this study to create word-of-mouth. In addition, this study has a certain role in promoting the protection of animals and eliminating animal performances across the country and even the world.

This study mainly analyzed the marketing strategy of Nanjing Hongshan Forest Zoo based on the STEPPS model by collecting secondary data. There is a lack of interviews on the communication strategy of refusing animal performances from the zoo's internal staff. Future researchers can conduct a more comprehensive analysis through surveys or interviews with people inside the zoo or those involved.

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