

Case #3b. Companies Buying “Likes” for Their Facebook Fan Pages

Synopsis: Case 3b looks at companies that sell large numbers of fake fans to companies for their fan pages and asks you to judge the circumstances as to when it is ethical for companies to buy or sell fake fans, using the ethical framework of Module 3.

Facebook.com is the largest worldwide social network used for communication and also for company promotion.

A problem has emerged because of companies like **boostlike.com** that are selling “likes” or “followers” on Facebook.com. Nobody knows who the owner of **boostlike.com** is, but people know that employees are from Asia.

On **boostlike.com**, owners of “fan pages” or “business pages” can buy some number of “likes” on their page. For example, for 500 likes you have to pay 42 \$US and your likes will be on your page during 10 days. These “virtual likes” are made by low-wage Asian employees. The rationale for buying likes is that people go to a fan or business page and are influenced by the number of fans. Higher numbers are meant to imply a quality firm and service in a customer’s eyes.

Not aware that likes can be bought, customers or followers believe that numbers of fans on a page are relevant and real. Customers don’t consider the possibility of an illegal means to increase likes on a page. Although Facebook’s has rules against building artificial likes, the rules are difficult to enforce.

In 2012 **Rory Cellan-Jones**, a British journalist focused on technology and economic issues, made a project called **VirtualBagel** to assess the value of likes on a Facebook fan page. VirtualBagel is a non-existent company. He used boostlike.com, paid 10 \$US and during 24 hours, VirtualBagel had 1600 Likes. During 4 days his fictional page had 3000 likes. The majority of likes were from Asian countries. Notably, there were no reactions, comments, sharing – no conversation—regarding these likes.

After this project, some media will start to analyze a number of profiles on Facebook. It is quite easily to search profiles with likes, because these profiles have same

structure: high number with fans, no comments, no reactions, only photos, and users are usually from Asia with common names.

QUESTIONS:

1. Present the arguments for and against the following statements:

In answering Q1a and Q1b, be sure to consider the ethical dilemma small, entry-level companies face in marketing their products by referencing the „Resolving Ethical Dilemmas“ checklist in Module 3. (reproduced below) Explain which of these elements would argue in support of buying fan pages and which would argue against it?

a. It is ethical for companies to buy fans for their fan pages.

b. It is ethical for boost.com to create false „likes.“

2. What should Facebook’s role be in monitoring companies like boost.com and “validating” “likes” on the Facebook website? In answering this question construct an elementary ethical code of general precepts and specific practices for Facebook to apply to this problem that it could post on the Facebook website.

(maximum length: 300 words total for both questions)

This case was prepared by Klara Hencova, a student at the University of Hradec Kralove, under the direction and with the assistance of Professor Earl Molander.

Resolving Ethical Dilemmas Checklist

An ethics case poses an ethical dilemma for a manager (a) internal to the firm or (b) external to the firm – in which he/she is uncertain how to act. Ethical issues are raised, but ethical guidelines are unclear or contradictory. Often conflicting ethical signals come from one or more of the following:

- a. the manager’s personal ethics (one can think of this as the baseline reference in ethical dilemmas for the individuals, just as profit is the baseline reference for the business enterprise)

- b. formal company policy (which may dictate how ethical dilemmas should be handled, either implicitly or explicitly)
- c. informal group norms within the company or industry
- d. societal values (which can be fragmented and contradictory)
- e. professional standards (which can be formalized in ethical codes)
- f. the ethics of one's superiors in the organization (which may have to be inferred)