

## SeaWorld works on improving its image

By Sandra Pedicini

SeaWorld is working aggressively on improving its image as it continues to fend off criticism over its whales in captivity.

The company is disputing animal-rights activists online, soliciting fan support and trying to call more attention to its work with animals — such as rescuing underweight orphan manatees.

SeaWorld is making these efforts amid declining attendance and lingering controversy intensified by last year's anti-captivity "Blackfish" documentary. The company said in an earnings report last week that negative publicity contributed to an overall third-quarter attendance decline.



Caption SeaWorld Orlando -- Shamu Christmas...Miracles

SEAWORLD ORLANDO

SeaWorld Orlando offers up a special Shamu Christmas...Miracles show during the 2013 holiday season from Nov. 23-Dec. 31, 2013.



Caption Sea of Trees at SeaWorld Orlando

#### SEAWORLD ORLANDO

SeaWorld Orlando ramps up spending on its Christmas attractions and decorations, including the new Sea of Trees, more than 100 massive trees, each sparkling, lighted and choreographed to classic holiday tunes. Nov. 23-Dec. 31, 2013.

Caption The Polar Express Experience

Joe Burbank, Orlando Sentinel

The Polar Express Experience: - SeaWorld Orlando will once again transform its Wild Arctic attraction into a Christmas-themed simulator ride, the Polar Express Experience, based on the children's book by Chris Van Allsburg and the animated 2004 Warner Bros. movie. With the transformation...

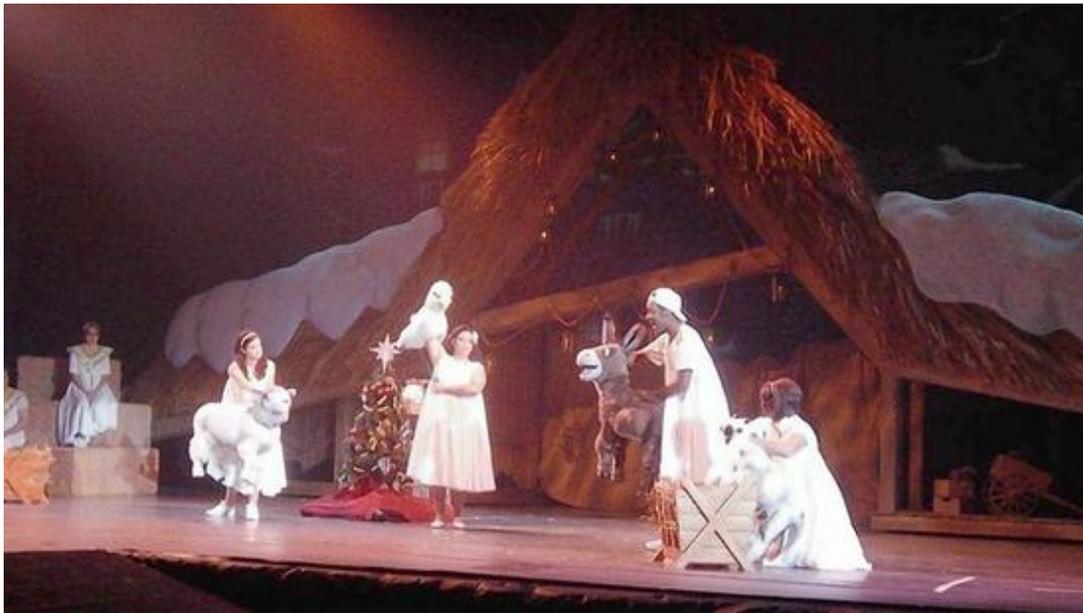


Caption Holidays at SeaWorld Orlando

#### SEAWORLD ORLANDO

The Winter Wonderland on Ice is a spectacular show where Christmas comes to life with towering water fountains, magnificent fireworks and some of the most talented ice skaters in the world. Select dates Nov. 23-Dec. 31, 2013.





Caption 'O Wondrous Night' holiday show at SeaWorld Orlando

Dewayne Bevil, Orlando Sentinel

'O Wondrous Night' is presented at the Nautilus Theater during SeaWorld's Christmas Celebration select nights Nov. 23 - Dec. 31, 2013.

"I think we've just realized we have to do a better job of telling our story, sharing the good work we do," company spokeswoman Aimee Jeansonne Becka said, reiterating the thoughts expressed by Chief Executive Officer Jim Atchison earlier this year.

"You're going to see a PR offensive coming here," Wells Fargo analyst Tim Conder told CNBC last week. "You're going to see SeaWorld being more open about who they are, educating people [about] who they are, with other organizations."

But SeaWorld will have a tough battle ahead, some experts say.

"People ... know about the killer-whale controversy, and it's making them increasingly uncomfortable," said Jim Hill, a theme-park-industry blogger. "You don't get people to buy \$90 tickets to your theme park if they're uncomfortable about the animals you have on display."

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Atchison told analysts last week that SeaWorld has hired new people with expertise in public affairs, along with outside advisers "to help us navigate some of this."

Earlier this year, SeaWorld created a "Truth" website that talks about its animal care and is critical of "Blackfish." It also launched a "Truth Team," encouraging people to express their support for the parks online.

When People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals recently pressured AAA to sever ties with SeaWorld, the company sent emails urging fans of the theme park to contact the auto club and show their support. In an email last month, SeaWorld spokesman Fred Jacobs called the response "enthusiastic." SeaWorld said AAA continues to work with the company.

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SeaWorld plans to spend an additional \$10 million on marketing next year. In California, legislators proposed a ban on killer whales for entertainment, and executives say the San Diego park has been affected by negative publicity. Ads there are expected to focus on conservation. Atchison noted SeaWorld's animal-rescue program has helped more than 24,000 animals during its half-century history.

SeaWorld points out it is also embarking on a "major multimillion-dollar partnership focused on protecting the ocean" but is not yet providing details. SeaWorld earlier this year committed \$10 million for killer-whale research at the same time it announced plans to nearly double habitat for its orcas. For that expansion, it has created an advisory panel that includes experts from the University of California.

SeaWorld also is disputing its foes' statements on its blog. And it has provided what it calls "a small startup investment" for Orlando blogger Eric Davis' "Awesome Ocean," a website about marine life that includes positive posts about marine parks and attacks on their critics. The site launched in June.

Davis and former SeaWorld trainer Mark Simmons, who appeared in "Blackfish" and now describes the movie as inaccurate, say SeaWorld and similar attractions do important conservation work.

"I think because of the good, the importance of these institutions ... and the role they play in wildlife conservation, they're going to outlast this," said Simmons, a partner in a marine-park consulting company.

Others disagree and say SeaWorld could be facing a shift in how people view its business.

The Animal Welfare Institute and Whale and Dolphin Conservation in May released results of a poll they commissioned showing half of Americans oppose keeping orcas captive, up from 39 percent in 2012. The groups oppose captivity. The most recent poll from the Alliance of Marine Mammal Parks and Aquariums, released in 2012, said 91 percent of Americans see marine parks as important in promoting environmental conservation.

Atchison told analysts last week that "the attacks that we've had on our brand ... we don't see as kind of lingering and lasting."

But they are continuing. A billboard ad purchased by an animal-rights activist recently went up on Interstate 75 near Florida's Turnpike and will remain for a year. "Free World Not Slaveworld," it says, with a picture of an orca. "End whale captivity."

Next year, former SeaWorld trainer John Hargrove, who was featured in the movie "Blackfish," has a book coming out that is critical of the company.

"Blackfish" was one of a series of blows SeaWorld has suffered since 2010, when the killer whale Tilikum killed Orlando trainer Dawn Brancheau. In 28 broadcasts the film has reached 26 million people, a CNN spokeswoman said, citing figures from the Nielsen Co. The movie on Tuesday aired on BBC Four in the United Kingdom.

Rather than fighting a public-relations war, branding consultant and author Denise Lee Yohn said, SeaWorld should probably focus on making big changes in its parks.

"The only thing that's going to get them ahead is if they really work on the actual experience of the parks and give people positive things to say about the experiences of being there," she said.

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