

Interview with Deborah James, Fair Trade Director at Global Exchange 01/29/02 by *Sebastian Gallander

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In the fall of 1999, the international human rights organization Global Exchange requested Starbucks Coffee Co. to offer Fair Trade certified coffee in all of its stores. Under the leadership of its Fair Trade Director, Deborah James, Global Exchange started the 'Roast Starbucks Campaign'. In the spring of 2000, Global Exchange halted the campaign because Starbucks announced it would offer Fair Trade Coffee in all stores nationwide and had already signed an agreement with the certification agency TransFairUSA. In the eyes of Global Exchange, this concession amounted to the single largest commitment ever to Fair Trade Coffee in the United States. How did this great turnaround happen? Sebastian Gallander asked Deborah James.

SG

Ms. James, when you first started your campaign against Starbucks did you take into account that the company was already considerably engaged in Corporate Social Responsibility efforts?

DJ

Yes, it actually played a role in our consideration for choosing Starbucks, because we knew that they put themselves in the public eye as a socially responsible company. The fact that Starbucks is using that as part of their marketing and advertising leaves them open to being exposed when they are not socially responsible. So the fact that they say] they are socially responsible opens the door for us to target them. Additionally, we were in touch with the U.S. Labor Education in the Americas Project, the group that led the campaign against them in 1996, which prompted them to create their first code of conduct. We knew that this group was very disillusioned with the amount of follow through that Starbucks actually had with implementing their code.

SG

So the fact that Starbucks was already engaged did not insulate the corporation?

DJ

No, not at all. We knew that the code was written on paper and that's about all it was worth because there was no monitoring system to be able to ensure that there were actual improvements. And, in fact, they refused to disclose the locations of the coffee plantations that they purchased from. Until there is any independent monitoring verification, there is no reason to assume there has been improvement in working conditions.

SG

What happened between your first approach to Starbucks in 1999 and their commitment to Fair Trade Coffee in spring 2000?

DJ

They first met with us and said that they were considering introducing Fair Trade Coffee but could not make any commitment to it. And then just a couple of days after that they announced that they had purchased 75, 000 pounds of Fair Trade Coffee. We thought that really was not enough and not at all appropriate for the size of Starbucks. So we planned as many demonstrations as we could across the country in just a couple of weeks - we had about 30 demonstrations planned at different cities. We also had people sending in postcards and letters to Starbucks and we also had people faxing from our Website asking that Starbucks carry Fair Trade certified coffee. And then we had those demonstrations organized for April 13th. But on April 10th they made the announcement that they had signed a contract with TransFair. That was the step that we had been waiting for, which they had refused to do up until that point. They made the announcement that they were going to carry Fair Trade Coffee in all of their stores across the country, which was our primary demand – that it not just be a limited market and just for a short period of time. They had done this previously with their shade coffee -- where they bought only two containers and made a big deal out of it. But this was such a small amount that they only carried it in certain markets where they knew there was a lot of education about shade coffee. But after one or two months it was gone.

So our big point now was that it has to be everywhere so that not only people knowledgeable about Fair Trade are buying it, but also uninformed people are finding out about it because they are Starbucks costumers. We also wanted it to be permanently available and not just for a month or two.

SG

So your primary goal was to make this a lasting effort?

DJ

Yes.

SG

But why did Starbucks meet with you in the first place?

DJ

They had agreed to meet with us because they were trying to reason with us and were trying to get us to realize that they were trying as hard as they could to find some Fair Trade coffee. That's always been their excuse – they said they could not find any.

SG

But what was your first step?

DJ

At first we sent a letter to them in November 1999 in which we formulated our demands. We got a letter back a couple of weeks later.

SG

... in which they immediately offered to have a dialogue with you?

DJ

Yes. They are very dialogue-oriented. They are pretty open to just having meetings. Because of their socially responsible image, they want you to know that they are open, so they didn't mind meeting with us. But they were not willing to change anything.

SG

How did you know that?

DJ

The meeting was on the same day as their annual shareholder meeting, where we – enabled by the fact that Global Exchange founder Medea Benjamin holds Starbucks shares and thus has the right to speak there - asked them publicly, "When are you going to start carrying Fair Trade Coffee?" And they said, "We are looking into it". But they did not agree to carry it at that meeting. We said, "Promise right now to start carrying it soon" and they said "No, we are not going to promise that." Then we were escorted out by security.

After the shareholder meeting we had our meeting with the person who is responsible for social responsibility, Sue Mecklenburg. Sue is not a vice president. She is the person who is sent out to meet with groups like us, but its not until it gets serious that they have their vice presidents come in. Her job is to tell everybody how much they care and that they really want to make this work but she doesn't have a lot of power within the company.

But, I almost forgot, in between our first letter and the meeting, a local TV station ran an investigation about Starbucks labor practices in Guatemala. They had interviewed some children as young as eight years old who were working in fields that sold coffee to Starbucks. Right after that we organized a demonstration at a local Starbucks in San Francisco.

SG

But the TV report was independent from you – you did not leak something to the journalists?

DJ

Totally. We only heard about it when it was coming on television.

SG

This probably enhanced Starbucks's willingness to meet with you

DJ

Yes. The report was on TV Thursday night. The next day we had the demonstration in front of their store. So they had to put out a statement on that Friday. And that Friday night the TV station was very happy because they could say, "Oh look. Our report last night caused this group to demonstrate. Hopefully Starbucks will move forward." Then we decided we would pull everybody together and go protest at their shareholder meeting. And because of all that – I had put out something saying we are going to demonstrate at the Starbucks shareholder meeting - they called us to arrange a meeting.

SG

So they had not agreed to do it before?

DJ

No, they hadn't. It was just because they could see that we were ramping up. And then we had the meeting with them at the shareholder meeting and we said "You need to carry this or we are going to start campaigning against you", like seriously, and they said "We are not going to do it". And we said "Fine, we are going to campaign against you." And they said "Fine". Of course not literally but something with the same meaning basically.

SG

Would you say they built some kind of relationship with you – instead of just disseminating messages out to you or to the media?

DJ

They had sent us a couple of letters before and then they called and asked us to meet. So yes. They are perfectly willing to enter into dialogue.

SG

Was this helpful for moving towards a solution, instead of just disseminating messages and sending out press releases?

DJ

We appreciate that they agree to our demands. I don't really know if their meeting or dialoguing with us necessarily brought them any closer to the agreement or not. I would say that our demonstrations brought them closer to agreeing to carry Fair Trade Coffee in their stores. I think it is just part of their corporate culture – they definitely try to head off stuff like demonstrations by meeting with groups. I definitely believe that they meet with people in order that they don't have to meet the goals of the group. They are meeting with us to try to get us not to have demonstrations, whereas the demonstrations is what actually gets us close to our goal of getting them to buy Fair Trade Coffee. And they just want us to understand how hard it is for them. Our point is to get them to understand that we are very serious about making them comply with our demands.

The main thing is that we don't have a relationship with them necessarily. Its not that we were trying to get them to work with us – we were trying to get them to sign a contract to carry Fair Trade, which means that they had to have a relationship with TransFair, not with us.

SG

What is your evaluation of the whole effort? Was it a breakthrough for your side?

DJ

Absolutely.

SG

Starbucks is the biggest roaster of Fair Trade Coffee now. Before your initiative, they weren't roasting it at all. So this was a big step at the time.

DJ

Yes, that's true.

SG

Starbucks commits itself to social responsibility – now even more, in terms of the countries where they get their coffee. Do you think this will make the company and its reputation stronger if and when they face future protests?

DJ

Probably. Because anytime you go through that kind of experience you learn how to do it better. They have now enlisted a corporate PR firm that is helping them try to deal with the Organic Consumer Association, which they did not do with us. They are getting smarter in how to try to keep activists of their backs.

SG

But - apart from dealing with the actual process – do you think the general reputation of Starbucks is safeguarded by the fact that the corporation acts even more socially responsible now?

DJ

Yes, I do.

SG

How do you see the response to this campaign in the media?

DJ

The media are mostly responsive. They like to cover conflict and so when you have something like this, where you are protesting against a big corporation that a lot of people don't like for different reasons, they are pretty responsive to covering that. They have been interested in the story.

Because our motive is just a moral one and we have been very focused on a single issue, the media has been responsive to the message we're trying to get across to Starbucks.

SG

How did the consumers react to the campaign?

DJ

From what I hear Starbucks is pleased with the response – Starbucks must be pleased enough with it that they are increasing their purchases. And they would not do that if it was not making money for them, i.e. if they were not selling a lot of it.

SG

At the end of the day, it helped Starbucks that they moved in your direction?

DJ

I don't know financially how much it ended up costing them. You never know what kind of long term impact that can have when you are trying to attack somebody's brand.

It certainly was very smart of them and definitely in their best interest to agree to our demands three days before the launch of our campaign, rather than waiting until after demonstrations and actions for six months or a year and then still not agreeing. I think that they saw the writing on the wall.

SG

So you canceled the protests?

DJ

We turned them into victory celebrations. That was to let them know that we would still be vigilant and that we still wanted to educate people about it - to let them know we will be watching and not just let them off the hook.

Starbucks said that they would introduce Fair Trade Coffee by the fall, and they did. They introduced it on October 4th, 2000.

SG

Did your campaign have any impact on the shareholders -- so that they became afraid and sold their stocks?

DJ

I don't really know. Certainly there is a lot of them who would rather be a part of a company that is doing the right thing as long as they can still make money out of it.

SG

What would be your advice for future campaigns, in terms of communicating with corporations?

DJ

Its good to be very clear about what your demands are and to address the fact that you need to engage in dialogue with them first. If you make a demand on them, they will write you a letter back for sure. You have to make sure that you get in writing that they are not going to agree to your demands. Of course, if they don't respond – which is rare – then it's just the same. You will say, they would not even write us back.

And then it's good to go out there and do what you are going to do. But you have to do it strongly to let them know that you are serious about it.

SG

Ms. James, thank you very much for this interview.

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