

Elisabeth Martin

An Analysis of Aerie's Public Relations and its Earned, Shareable, and Owned Media

Background

Aerie is a lingerie retailer and a sub-brand of American Eagle Outfitters that sells bras, undergarments, loungewear, activewear, accessories, and sleepwear for women. Aerie products are sold both in American Eagle Outfitters stores and stand-alone Aerie stores. Aerie was first established as its own brand in 2006, and the headquarters is in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. There are 148 stores, including 82 stores in 13 countries internationally (Wikipedia). Aerie has gained national attention as a result of its #AerieREAL campaign, which began in 2014 when the brand announced that it would no longer use supermodels to model its apparel, and would no longer digitally retouch the models in photos. In 2018, Aerie uses its platform to encourage body positivity among its target audience, 15 to 25-year-old women.

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to analyze Aerie's public relations strategy through analyzing the brand's social media, website, and press materials. Through this analysis, we can see what Aerie does well with their PR, what it could improve, what messages Aerie is sending to its target audience, and what its PR says about Aerie as a company.

Methods

To get an understanding of Aerie's PR strategies, I tracked Aerie's website, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, press website, press releases, and blog between September 17 and November 25, 2018.

I tracked these channels because each channel is used for slightly different purposes and each grants insight into owned, shared, and earned media. I chose to track Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and Aerie's blog because the majority of Aerie's target audience is on these networks, so these are the primary channels that Aerie uses to communicate with that audience.

Additionally, I chose to track the website because it is the primary interface for customers looking to buy products. Tracking the press website and press releases gives insight into what is going on with the company and is important for understanding Aerie's media relations.

However, I did not track Tumblr, Youtube, Pinterest, the mobile app, or Instagram stories. I excluded Tumblr and Pinterest because most of the content that Aerie posted on these networks was also posted on Instagram. I excluded YouTube because videos on YouTube were posted on many of Aerie's other social media channels, so looking at YouTube alone would be redundant. I excluded the mobile app because it is mainly a shopping channel and shares many aspects with the website. Lastly, I excluded Instagram stories in favor of analyzing permanent posts because users cannot retrieve metrics like likes or views on Instagram stories.

The frequency in which I tracked the various channels largely depended on the frequency in which I expected each channel to contain new content. I received notifications when Aerie published content on Instagram and Twitter, so I checked these posts many times daily. I checked for Facebook once a week because many of the posts on Facebook were also posted on the other social networks. I checked Aerie's blog, website, press releases, and mobile app because these channels changed much less frequently than Aerie's social media.

When assessing Aerie's social media channels, I took note of how many posts per day there were, the tone of the post, the targeting techniques used, the purpose of the post, the type of

post it was (link, photo, text, or video,) and what, if anything, made the post stand out from the others. Additionally, I watched for interaction with customers within these channels. When looking at Aerie's website, I looked at its design, information, and content. When looking at Aerie's press room and press releases, I took note of the frequency of releases, style, newsworthiness, focus, purpose, and messages. Lastly, for each channel, I looked for what set it apart and made it distinct from the other channels. I documented information by screenshotting exemplary content and writing down important findings.

Findings

Shareable Media

Statistics of Shareable Media Channels

On Instagram, Aerie's account @Aerie has one million followers and posts an average of 2-3 times per day. Instagram's specialty is high user interaction. On Twitter, Aerie's account @Aerie has approximately 105,000 followers and posts 2-3 times per day in addition to retweeting users' tweets about the company. A strength of Twitter is that Aerie retweets user photos about their products, which shows the "real" women Aerie tries to represent. On Facebook, Aerie has nearly two million followers and posts an average of 2-3 times per day. Aerie's posts are mostly the same content across these platforms, with the exception of retweets and comments. However, a strength of Facebook is that through facebook event pages, Aerie's events are prominently displayed.

Blog

Aerie's blog publishes new content 1-2 times per week, and each post has a playful and casual tone. These blog posts rely heavily on photos, and cover topics from style suggestions,

gift guides, travel guides, and recipes. The posts are written from an employee perspective, but they act as the voice for the company.

PR Model

Aerie mostly uses a two-way asymmetric model of PR, though it uses aspects of a two-way symmetric model in some of its messaging. An example of this two-way symmetric model is that Aerie engages in corporate social responsibility through partnerships with nonprofit organizations. Therefore, the company seems to benefit from customers buying the product, but they also give back to the customers and the community. Additionally, through the #AerieREAL campaign, the company seems to emphasize the importance of the women who buy their products in making the company what it is. The company promotes a message of body positivity and self love in order to improve the way women see themselves. Also, Aerie is great at interpersonal communication on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Aerie responds to user comments on Instagram especially frequently, not only about customer service needs or questions, but also about personal matters (or even just to say “thank you.”)

However, we cannot forget that Aerie is a company that exists and designs its PR strategy around trying to sell products to its target audience. The more products people buy from Aerie, the more Aerie profits and benefits. Therefore, a two-way asymmetric model is evident in the fact that it has clearly researched its target audience thoroughly in order to understand what makes them want to buy their products. For example, in the #AerieREAL campaign, a problem Aerie may be attempting to solve is, “underwear shopping makes women feel terrible about themselves because they don’t look like supermodels. Therefore, they avoid shopping for underwear.” The purpose of the campaign would therefore be to tell potential customers that they

are what make the underwear special instead of the other way around, imperfections are beautiful and everybody has them, and at Aerie, we celebrate them. While this message can have an effect on women's views of themselves, the ultimate goal in this messaging is to get women to buy more products from Aerie.

Events and Campaigns

The #AerieREAL campaign in which Aerie does not use supermodels, does not retouch photos, and uses models of diverse sizes, races, and appearance is an ongoing campaign that has become nearly synonymous with the brand. However, Aerie has added a dimension to this campaign by touring the country and setting up pop-up events at universities in which attendees can meet an Aerie "Role Model" (referring to the models/representatives of the company) and shop Aerie's newest collections.

At the beginning of November, Aerie posted about "Role Models" attending Glamour Magazine's Glamour Women of the Year Summit, in which the models talked about careers, inclusivity, life advice, and the collective power of women.

On October 6, Aerie joined in celebrating the launch of Dove's #GirlCollective project, where "Role Models" helped lead workshops that aimed to help build self-esteem and body confidence for young girls (Dove US).

Targeting Techniques

Aerie seems to focus on Instagram above their other social networks. We can see this because the content from Facebook and Twitter is the same as what is on Instagram, Instagram gets more follower engagement than any other network, and Aerie is most responsive to user comments on Instagram. Focusing on Instagram is wise for Aerie, though, because Instagram is

used most heavily by 18 to 24-year-olds, which is most of their target audience of 15 to 25-year-olds. Aerie also targets diverse people by using diverse models. Aerie's models, as a group, tend to represent many races, sizes, and body types, and some models even have physical disabilities. By representing many demographics of women, many diverse women might identify with the brand.

Aerie also targets their target age group by posting photos and videos of models in that age group. Aerie's Instagram posts contain everything from college-age people to pregnant women. Pregnant women could appeal to people in their mid to late twenties, who may be pregnant or considering being pregnant soon. Showing pregnant women in Aerie apparel makes it clear that Aerie is not just a brand for teenagers. In contrast, Aerie also posts images of college-age women in dorms and small apartments, having sleepovers or wearing pajamas. Clearly, this is meant to target women in college, but younger women may also be thinking towards college or perhaps looking forward to being of that age. I think it is wise that Aerie does not post photos of models younger than college age because it may alienate the older audience.

Aerie targets women in the middle class and higher with statements advertising sales. For example, when a post says that sweatshirts are only \$25, this only appeals to people who think that spending \$25 on a sweatshirt is reasonable. Additionally, Aerie posts pictures of people wearing Aerie in an iconic travel destination, further implicating that the kind of people that wear Aerie can also afford to travel.

Messages

Aerie tends to use one-sided messages in their posts and does not reference their competitors at all. At first, I thought this was strange, but at second thought, it might be good for

them. Since Aerie is all about women supporting women and being body positive, comparing itself to competitor brands like Victoria's Secret may appear hypocritical. However, there is subtle two-sided messaging in the #AerieREAL campaign. Some could interpret this as Aerie calling other brands fake, or even jabbing at Victoria's Secret for their exclusive use of supermodels and digital retouching.

Aerie sends messages conveying the ideas that the real you is beautiful, you should be proud of your body, and women should build each other up instead of tearing each other down. These messages are a self esteem appeal, telling followers that supporting Aerie and wearing Aerie products means they support a world where women are kind to each other and women should not be ashamed of their imperfections. Buying into Aerie's messages and values makes you a better, kinder woman, it seems.

Lastly, Aerie's posts using the liking and social proof modes of influence. When a follower sees somebody like them modeling Aerie's clothes, they are more likely to buy the clothes themselves. Aerie also makes social proof stronger by paying opinion leaders in the target audience to be brand ambassadors on social media. Social proof can be extremely persuasive, especially if a viewer likes or admires the people participating. This is what Aerie's "Role Model" program is about. When viewers perceive the models as being both beautiful and likeable, they may be more likely to buy the product.

Owned Media

Website

Aerie's website is a quality website, though it shares the site with its parent company, American Eagle. Having a quality website is important for their brand because their target

audience often takes advantage of online shopping. One strength of the website is that it changed often, including a dramatic change to promote Aerie's winter collection. Aerie's website has many strengths. It is compatible on all devices and browsers, the style is consistent and recognizable as Aerie's brand, there is a cookie trail, and navigation is simple and easy to find. The website is interactive by its nature as a shopping tool, and there is a search tool that makes it easy to find what a customer is looking for. Also, the website contains links to Aerie's Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Pinterest, and blog, alongside more corporate pages that contain information for investors and about careers.

However, Aerie's website does lack a few key elements. A "help" page was present in the navigation bar, but when I tried to pull it up, it said the page was not found. Also, the "about us" section of the website is at the very bottom of the page and it is difficult to find instead of being prominent on the page. Only after finding this small link can a reader then view information about Aerie's corporate social responsibility, mission statement, and news. The website is much less interactive than Aerie's social media channels and takes on more of a press agency and publicity model. Lastly, the website was lacking many of the key messages present on Aerie's social media channels.

Press Website

The press website for Aerie that comes up in Google results when searching "Aerie Press Room" is barren. It only contains photos for "fall 2018 looks" and "past seasons," but does not contain press releases or other media materials. The press website did not change during the timeframe of this analysis. However, there is a news and media section of AEO's information page that contains press releases and contact information for corporate communications, public

relations, and social media representatives. One problem, though, is that the first result in a Google search when searching “Aerie press releases” is an investor relations page, which contains fewer, different press releases, but no press materials.

Press Releases

The press releases present between the two websites could do better with SEO. Clearly, finding the press releases is challenging, and the first search results do not lead directly to AEO’s main media page. However, some of the press releases practice newsjacking. For example, at the beginning of October, Aerie published a news release that announced Aerie’s partnership with a nonprofit that promotes prevention and early detection of breast cancer in women. The release was timed well because October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month, and Aerie knew that journalists would be looking for news about Breast Cancer Awareness Month at this time.

Earned Media

The most notable aspect of Aerie’s earned media is that while Aerie does not directly attack Victoria’s secret in their messaging, its earned media does it for them. For example, an article published on November 13 entitled “Move Over Victoria’s Secret: Lingerie Brands Embrace Body Positivity” makes the argument that Aerie is a more welcoming place to shop.

“In the Victoria’s Secret window at the Shops at Liberty Place, a thin model with parted lips and straight hair stares straight ahead while wearing a black bra and lace undies. The words plastered around her image say she’s wearing the “Very Sexy Push-Up” bra.

A block away at 1721 Chestnut Street at the intimates brand Aerie, models of all sizes show their stretch marks. One sits in a wheelchair, while another wears an ostomy pouch to collect waste. The words “Change your bra!” and “Don’t change you” surround them.”

Many of articles written about Aerie compare the two brands in a similar manner. Other forms of earned media include information from Aerie or AEO's press releases (MarketWatch), or writing about one of Aerie's most famous "Role Models," Iskra Lawrence (Weiser, Chad, and Gary Trock). This media is overwhelmingly positive.

Crises

Aerie does not appear to have any smoldering or apparent crises. In fact, when searching terms like "Aerie crises," "Aerie bad," or "Aerie problem," the results are about things that Aerie's competitor, Victoria's Secret, does wrong. Often, these articles written about Victoria's secret cite their lack of diversity and inclusivity and the overworking of their models (Stevens), which are things that Aerie has already addressed within their own company.

Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility

Aerie is an ethical company, which can be seen by its CSR efforts. According to AEO's informational website, Aerie and AEO as a whole works with manufacturers to ensure that suppliers, manufacturers, and labor are sourced responsibly. AEO also participates in environmental scanning in order to make their clothes more sustainable, by reducing water, saving energy, improving materials, and recycling. AEO is also known to stand for empowering youth, promoting young women's health, and advancing equality. AEO has a CSR report published on the AEO informational website that anybody can access. We also see Aerie's CSR efforts on social media. For example, in response to the October 27 shooting of a synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Aerie posted a graphic on Instagram with the words, "Pittsburgh, our hometown, we are with you."

Evaluation and Critique

Aerie does a lot of things well in terms of public relations. Firstly, one aspect that makes their Instagram so successful is that Aerie's posts are not overly self-promoting. Many posts do not directly reference their products, but are instead aesthetically pleasing photos of somebody wearing the product or the product in the background of a photo of something else. This balance keeps Aerie's social media from being overwhelming. Instead of feeling like an account full of advertisements, it feels like the account of a (wealthy) friend. Aerie also does a great job enlisting opinion leaders to promote products. By calling models "Role Models" and sharing information about them, Aerie strategically puts these opinion leaders in place to encourage others to buy Aerie products. Also, Aerie does a great job communicating interpersonally with followers on social media. Aerie frequently, and quickly, answers questions and responds to comments with thoughtful and personalized notes on both Instagram and Twitter. However, they could be more responsive to their audience on Facebook. Additionally, the use of bright, vivid, high contrast colors in their posts furthers the happy mood that is prevalent across Aerie's social media. It feels good to look at their content. Lastly, Aerie's CSR efforts reinforce the company's messaging about the importance of empowering people. Aerie truly practices what it preaches, which is important to the people in its target audience.

However, Aerie could also improve in a few ways. First, there should be more distinct lines between the brands American Eagle and Aerie. For example, Aerie should have its own website that is only linked to the American Eagle website instead of being embedded within it. Aerie has stand-alone stores and strong campaigns and messages, so it should have a stand-alone website and blog as well. Next, Aerie should make their CSR efforts more obvious and easier to find information on than it does. Their target audience really cares about shopping at ethical

companies, so this information should be easy to access. Also, Aerie needs to put press releases in one, easy-to-find web page that contains all of the necessary media information instead of spreading information out over two different pages. Then, Aerie needs to enhance SEO so that this single web page is dominant over the others. It would also be a good idea to release news releases more often, though it is good that Aerie does not overwhelm journalists with excessive amounts of news releases.

Through following Aerie's various PR channels, we have seen the ways in which Aerie interacts with its customers, conveys messages, builds its reputation, targets its audience, and engages with the community. As Aerie continues to grow as a company, it can rely on the solid practices it has already implemented as well as improve its strategies to become an exemplary model of public relations.

Works Cited

- “American Eagle and Aerie to Hire 22,000 Associates for Holiday.” *MarketWatch*, MarketWatch, 10 Oct. 2018, www.marketwatch.com/press-release/american-eagle-and-aerie-to-hire-22000-associates-for-holiday-2018-10-10.
- “#GirlCollective.” *Dove US*, www.dove.com/us/en/stories/campaigns/girl-collective.html.
- “Responsible Sourcing.” *AEO Inc*, www.aeo-inc.com/responsible-sourcing/.
- Stevens, Jenny. “Starvation Diets, Obsessive Training and No plus-Size Models: Victoria's Secret Sells a Dangerous Fantasy.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 22 Nov. 2018, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/nov/22/victorias-secret-show-angels-lingerie.
- Silverman, Ellie, and Philadelphia Inquirer. “Move over Victoria's Secret: Lingerie Brands Embrace Body Positivity.” *The Newport Daily News*, The Newport Daily News, 13 Nov. 2018, www.newportri.com/news/20181113/move-over-victorias-secret-lingerie-brands-embrace-body-positivity.
- “Sustainability.” *AEO Inc*, <https://www.aeo-inc.com/sustainability/>.
- Weiser, Chad, and Gary Trock. “Iskra Lawrence Puts the Motion in the Ocean During Sexy Beach Shoot.” *The Blast*, The Blast, 26 Nov. 2018, theblast.com/iskra-lawrence-miami-aerie-photo-shoot/.
- “Aerie (American Eagle Outfitters).” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 26 Oct. 2018, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aerie_\(American_Eagle_Outfitters\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aerie_(American_Eagle_Outfitters)).

