

Rogierian Argument Project Analysis: Amazon Should Become a B-Corp

Introduction

For our fact-based, Rogierian framework argument, our group chose to convince Amazon that they would gain value through acquiring B-corp certification. We acted as B-Lab, a non-profit that offers a b-corp certification to companies that adhere to a higher degree of corporate social responsibility. This social responsibility includes criteria such as sustainable environmental practices, financial transparency, an ethical supply chain, human rights policies and a general regard for the well-being of a company's stakeholders. We made the argument that Amazon should join the b-corp movement because it will enable greater success for the company, inspire others, and lead the way to a more sustainable and ethical world of business.

Based on our understanding of Amazon's business model, we knew that we would need to offer more than just ethical arguments to the Amazon team to convince them to adopt the b-corp challenge and alter the company's business structure. It was our goal to convince Amazon that this change would provide long-term financial benefits that would outweigh the initial expense and restructuring that b-corp criteria would require of the business. Our group took on both the research and the presentation with the goal of offering a solution that is beneficial for both Amazon and B Lab. Rather than aggressively pushing our agenda, we approached the situation from a place of suggestion and education, continuously referring to the Rogierian structure to ensure that the argument we presented contained a willingness to understand any counter-arguments, and focused on the benefits our view could provide to Amazon.

Research and Contributions

As a group, we spent a substantial amount of time researching and getting to know B Lab as an organization—what drives them, what their corporate culture is like, what their vision is for the world—so that we could truly advocate for the organization and the work it does. We also did quite a bit of research into Amazon to understand the pain points it is experiencing and offer the best solutions. This research enabled us to develop well-thought out responses to concerns Amazon may have about the true benefits of b-corp certification.

(Student A)'s role in the group was to research what benefits b-corp certification can offer a company. This was vital to building the group's fact-based argument because we used this evidence to communicate the value a b-corp status could offer Amazon. The benefits *(Student A)* researched include increased employee productivity, improved employee retention, ability to attract an educated millennial workforce, reduction of operational costs, and increased consumer loyalty.

For the presentation, *(Student B)* provided the argument of the opposition (Amazon) in order to demonstrate the Rogerian aspect of the assignment. This helped to focus our argument on the challenges Amazon would face in becoming a b-corp, along with solutions to those problems. In addition to his part of the group write, *(Student B)* outlined the paper which helped to simplify the workflow and keep the group focused within the project guidelines.

For this assignment, *(Student C)*'s primary focus was to research the negative stigma and customer sentiment surrounding Amazon and examples of how b-corp certification can be a powerful marketing tool. For the presentation, *(Student C)* presented a use case of a successful marketing campaign involving a b-corp, provided examples of success stories and outlined how

B-Lab rates b-corps before certifying them. Apart from content planning and the presentation, he also contributed to the group write.

(Student D)'s contributions to the project included the development of the content outline and presentation narrative, research on the tangible financial benefits of becoming b-corp certified, visual cleanup of the Prezi presentation, presenting on the sustainability and streamlining benefits available to Amazon, and providing in-depth proofreading and copy editing of the group write.

Fact-Based Argumentation Strategies

Fact-based arguments state what has occurred or been discovered, and explore what implications this information may have. Because of this, they allow for very persuasive arguments that are difficult to challenge. As a group, we recognized that Amazon's business model is dissimilar from other b-corps and is not a clear fit with the values B-Lab promotes and strives for. This meant that persuading Amazon to consider b-corp certification presented us with a challenging argument. For Amazon, the consequences of becoming a b-corp would include a dramatic change and restructuring to its business model and management strategy. Our goal was to convince Amazon's Sustainability Team, and in extension the Board of Directors, that they could maintain Amazon's position as the world's leading online retailer and keep their low-cost business model while improving the business by becoming b-corp certified. The best strategy to lay out a clear and convincing argument with this audience in mind was through a fact-based argument that showed the financial benefits to Amazon.

Our group argued that becoming a b-corp would lower Amazon's operating costs, improve employee morale, increase productivity, and attract a new market segment of ethical consumers. This statement allowed us to set our factual argument in a context that would be

agreeable to Amazon's decision makers, presenting Amazon a means to higher profits while becoming more socially and environmentally responsible.

Rogerian Framework

The Rogerian form of argument strives to look at opposing viewpoints as objectively as possible to reach a mutually beneficial solution, rather than one party "winning." We opened our argument by analyzing some challenges Amazon has been struggling with, including negative press around poor working conditions and failing management strategy, which has at times bordered on employee abuse. The company's behavior alienates not just existing customers, but results in a loss of appeal to potential customers, low employee morale, loss of talent, and a toxic workplace culture. In our Rogerian argument, we demonstrated an understanding of Amazon's position by recognizing that its "rank and yank" employee management strategy has been successful for the company in the past in terms of growth and market share, but also addressed the concerns that this strategy has resulted in lack of cooperation, destructive internal competition, low employee morale, and loss of talent. We understand that from a purely profit-focused standpoint, Amazon is highly successful due to its extreme employee and logistics practices, and that suggesting a dramatic shift away from these tactics would not be seen favorably.

We suggested that management had a limited view with incomplete information, and that adjusting the business to meet b-corp requirements would essentially maintain the existing successful business model while updating and streamlining processes, ultimately lowering operating costs and leading to a greater profit margin. We also argued that as a byproduct of b-corp restructuring, Amazon would see employee morale, cooperation and productivity improve, and that the company's new b-corp status would attract a new market of consumers that only

spend ethically (such as the consumer base of Whole Foods, Amazon's recent acquisition), further increasing profits.

Meta Analysis: Appeals and Strategies

To build a persuasive and captivating argument, our group employed a tactful mixture of ethos and logos. We had a clear understanding of our audience and strategically built our argument around the financial benefits of becoming b-corp certified. We employed ethos throughout our presentation by drawing on the ethics of becoming a b-corp, but also used logos when we aligned our primary argument with Amazon's goal of growth and increased profit margins. A great example of our utilization of ethos and logos is when we ended our presentation, telling Amazon: "Becoming a b-corp isn't just the logical, smart thing to do. It's the right thing to do. So what do you say? Let's go save the world."

The tone of our argument followed the Rogerian style with elements of epideictic arguments, which focus on current social values and ideals, and deliberative arguments, which focus on changes we can make now to lead to a better outcome in the future. Our argument was epideictic in nature because we consistently drew on how b-corps challenge pre-existing notions of business that situate profit before people. After challenging the status quo, we then naturally moved into a deliberative argument by arguing that Amazon should become a b-corp. We approached Amazon in a friendly, compassionate and non-aggressive manner to find common ground that would benefit both parties.

Meta Analysis: Self-Critique

Our group could have made a stronger argument by better addressing Amazon's potential concern that the b-corp certification process would be too disruptive to its business. We did not properly address Amazon's reluctance to become a b-corp due to the drastic effect on the low-

cost leadership business model, management strategy, corporate culture, and overall success. To correctly employ a Rogerian argument, one must understand the opposition's argument, address their concerns in a satisfactory way, find mutually beneficial solutions, and compromise.

Evidence that may have eased some of Amazon's concerns surrounding change would be to explain how b-corps form a community that supports and holds all members accountable. We focused on the potential benefits that a b-corp certification would bring, but did not explain in enough detail how the process works. B-Lab does not just offer a certification to companies, but acts as a resource that assists companies through the b-corp certification process. This evidence would demonstrate that while the process might be somewhat disruptive, Amazon would have guidance and support. If we were to let Amazon know that becoming a b-corp was truly a process of setting reasonable goals for the future, it would likely curb some of their anxiety surrounding change.

Another way we could have strengthened the argument is by defining Amazon's problem in less ambiguous terms. Our group defined Amazon's problem as, "In a world where consumers are increasingly concerned with ethical spending and 'voting with their dollars', it is important for corporations to adapt to this changing marketplace." We then briefly mentioned how Amazon had some negative press surrounding employee abuse. The way we framed this problem excluded details that would have made the claim more credible. For example, we could have addressed whether or not Amazon's negative press is truly hurting their business and provided more evidence to show that consumers care about ethical spending.

The class audience presented another challenge because they may not have had enough knowledge about executive decision making to understand the business drawbacks of our proposal. Questions from our fellow students were not focused on the quality of the argument we

made, but rather on small details that were irrelevant to our proposal. This was a missed opportunity to engage in valuable question and answer in character and to answer additional concerns that Amazon may have had.

Successes and Learnings

Based on the peer review received from our classmates after the presentation, our team fared well with positive scores recorded by 14 peers. Out of seven possible points, our **subject** section scored an average of 5.55, the **organization** and clarity of the presentation scored an average of 5.82, the **preparation**, which deals with rehearsal, sequencing and pacing gave us our best mean figure of 6.36, the **awareness of audience** question saw an average rating of 5.91, and the **visual aids** gave us a recorded score of 5.45. Positive qualitative feedback focused on Prezi presentation, flow and oration, and the in-depth research and knowledge of the material. Some critical responses were about the content being too lengthy at times. One reviewer felt the presentation was not that clear at the beginning but later quoted “I understood and wanted to hear you.” The presentation, overall, saw positive feedback from peers and our efforts of research and presentation were unilaterally lauded.

The group project helped our team to really learn what a Rogerian framework encompasses and how to apply it in real world situations. The framework guided us in the construction of our argument in an effective manner which enabled our audience to understand our stance on a specific topic. The process of struggling with the framework and analyzing our project through that lens helped to really solidify the structure and considerations of the Rogerian model. In addition, we can proudly say that we have also learned how to make a good Prezi presentation.

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