

CLEANING UP APPLE'S POISON SUPPLY CHAIN



Source: macworld.co.uk

SUMMARY

By 2009, nearly 50% of the world's computers, cell phones, and digital cameras were being produced in Guangdong Province, China. Many multinational technology corporations like Apple had public commitments to being environmentally friendly, but chose manufacturers based only on price and quality.

These manufacturers would then short cut environmental regulations to keep prices down, often outsourcing to other suppliers. A series of heavy metal pollution incidents in 2009 shocked the country, causing an outcry from Chinese citizens and tighter restrictions from the government.

Ma Jun, founder of the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs (IPE)—a group dedicated to making pollution information accessible—saw an opportunity to capitalize on this momentum. Aiming to pressure multinational corporations to take responsibility for their manufacturers, both second and third-tier, his organization set up a database showing the connections between polluters and their largest buyers, linking hundreds of Chinese manufacturers to thirty major technology brands, including Apple. IPE published rankings of the tech companies and released their findings to the media.

Next, Chinese environmental organizations, including IPE, approached the companies with a letter. When companies didn't respond, they published their contact details and called on consumers to pressure them directly. One by one, the large brands started to clean up their supply chains. Apple, however, remained silent. Ma and his colleagues were particularly concerned given the company's large size and the fact that Chinese workers at a computer screen manufacturer had accused Apple of poisoning them with toxic chemicals.

Organizers escalated the pressure, releasing a report on Apple's supply chain called *The Other Side of Apple*. After receiving zero response, IPE and several other environmental organizations released a second report of additional suppliers linked to Apple and launched a media campaign called "Poison Apple" asking consumers to target the company. The persistence and strategic escalation of the campaign finally pushed Apple into action. In 2011, Apple approached IPE and began to clean up its supply chain, releasing its supplier list for the very first time.



Source: chinadialogue.net

ISSUE

- Apple's lack of responsibility for the massive pollution caused by its suppliers in China
- The need for supply chain accountability for international technology companies

WHO

The Chinese organization Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs (IPE) and non-governmental organization partners, both Chinese and international



WHERE

China, particularly Guangdong Province

GOALS

To make multinational companies (like Apple) more accountable for the pollution caused by their suppliers

STRATEGY

To publically link widely recognized technology companies (like Apple) with the pollution caused by their Chinese suppliers and then build public pressure on these companies

PLANNED OR SPONTANEOUS?

Planned. In 2009, multiple heavy metal pollution incidents in China launched the public and government into action. Ma Jun considered how IPE could best contribute and decided to focus on pressuring the technology companies that had recognizable name brands.

ISSUE FRAMING

The issue was framed in terms of corporate responsibility as well as human health and environmental protection.

LEADERS, PARTICIPANTS, ALLIES INCLUDING ELITES

Leaders:

- Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs (IPE), especially the group's founder Ma Jun

Participants and Allies:

- Other Chinese environmental organizations, including Green Beagle, Envirofriends, Green Stone Environmental Action Network, and Friends of Nature
- Nongovernmental organizations, including Pacific Environment and the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre who helped mobilize customers
- Consumers of Apple products internationally who helped pressure the company

TARGET

Decision makers at information technology companies, in particular Apple, e.g., CEO Steve Jobs and corporate responsibility officers. "We're not trying to single out any company," Ma said in an interview on the PBS NewsHour. "Apple singled out itself through the process by shutting down the door of communication entirely."



OPPONENT(S)

- Decision makers at Apple, e.g., Steve Jobs and corporate responsibility officers
- Chinese suppliers resistant to change because it would increase cost

TACTICS

- Database research and publication of pollution by companies' suppliers
- Ranking companies based on the pollution levels of their supply chains
- Contacting companies, including Apple, with supply chain pollution findings
- Publishing reports likely to get media coverage
- Publicity campaigns urging consumers to pressure first all of the tech companies and later, specifically Apple

A broad, persistent and effective level of communication from Ma Jun both domestically and internationally was an important factor in the campaign. "It seemed to me like we were coming to the point where you just hit a brick wall. There was complete silence from [Apple], and they weren't going to respond," said Matthew Collins of IPE. Yet Ma pushed ahead with the second report and Apple finally came to the table. Collins described Ma as "very diplomatic" and "very determined." He went on to say, "He's very good at talking to different people. So he's able to talk to Chinese government and foreign government people, and business, other NGOs."
~ "Publishing Pollution Data in China: Ma Jun and the Institute of Public and Environmental Affairs" by Case Consortium@Columbia, Columbia University

Comparing corporations to each other placed more pressure on them. No one wanted to be ranked below their competitors. As IPE's tactics continued to be met with silence from Apple, they kept escalating, releasing reports with new information and applying greater public pressure.

Tactics were low-risk as they were dispersed and targeting international companies.

RESPONSE BY OPPONENT

- For over a year and a half, the campaign was met with silence from Apple. Apple cited a policy of keeping their supply list a secret, not even acknowledging whether they were following up on report findings.
- Finally, after consistent pressure from the public and civil society groups, and only after founder Steve Jobs had died, Apple acknowledged its supply manufacturers and begin to clean up its supply chain.

MEDIA & MESSAGING

IPE reached out to media with their findings and provided media ready reports at various points in the campaign. There was also international coverage of the “Poison Apple” campaign in particular and media coverage in general that seemed to help push some of the companies into taking action.



OUTCOMES

- In January of 2012, Apple released a major Supplier Responsibility Report, naming for the first time its 156-company supplier list, representing 97% of its manufacturing, materials, and assembly for products around the world. The report also published the results of recent factory inspections, including 229 supplier audits, an 80% increase from the last report. Labor, human rights, environmental impact, ethics, and worker health and safety were included.
- Apple joined the Fair Labor Association, a network of civil society organizations, universities, and companies working together to raise labor standards worldwide.
- It is unclear to what degree the involvement of tech companies like Apple has impacted the level of toxicity in Guangdong Province. It is clear, though, the level of corporate accountability has made it easier to monitor and target the polluters.