American Express: Small Business Saturday
Sean Surrick

Every Successful company has public relations campaigns to help boost their brand. However, some may not be successful or they were done in bad taste. I want to discuss a public relations campaign that has achieved a lot and has become something more than what it originally set out to do; American Express’s Small Business Saturday. This is an event that occurs every year and it has become a staple holiday for the company. This public relations campaign is important because it is a well-known holiday, however, a lot of people do not know its origins and that it was created by American Express. This led me to believe that this campaign was unique and an outlier that proves how successful a public relations campaign can be not just for the company, but also for society as a whole. This event is now a recognized holiday in America and it has become more than just a PR campaign by a corporation to try and fix their image. This essay will explore all aspects of this public relations campaign starting with its history all the way to the present day. I will also discuss how Small Business Saturday became a national holiday and how it grew into such a successful public relations campaign. Being that this campaign is so unique, to fully understand and analyze it, one must understand its importance to the public relations industry while also acknowledging its role within the company that created it.

Small Business Saturday started in 2010 and was held on the Saturday after Thanksgiving which was the 27th of November that year. The concept was first introduced by American Express in 2010 as a way to put small businesses in the spotlight after the recession that occurred following the 2008 financial crisis. They wanted to create a holiday that celebrated small businesses and encouraged people to go out and shop at their local stores instead of the big corporations like Walmart and Amazon. American Express advertised the event all across the internet and on TV that year with ads that featured small businesses and interviews with the owners of the businesses that try to show the importance of supporting your local stores. That year, Amex gave customers rebates when they shopped locally as a promotion for the event. The event was instantly successful, and it quickly became an annual event after that. In the lead-
up to the next event in 2011, “the U.S. Senate passed a resolution supporting Small Business Saturday (Lake).” This is when the holiday started to feel less like a public relations campaign and more like a national holiday. That year, shopper awareness of the holiday was at 65% which was an increase of 30% compared to its first year (Weinmann). This growth showed Amex that this holiday had its place alongside other commercial holidays like Black Friday and Cyber Monday. Other big corporations saw the event’s success and partnered with American Express to promote the holiday. This led to even more awareness of the event and it has continued to grow in awareness and participants every year since.

In recent years, Small Business Saturday has continued to break records of money spent at local businesses and engagement during the holiday. A quote from Forbes author, Rohit Arora, shows how much of an increase in spending there is every year, “American Express reported that spending among U.S. consumers who shopped at independent retailers and restaurants on Small Business Saturday reached an estimated $23.3 billion in 2021, an increase of 18% from $19.8 billion spent in 2020 and an increase from pre-pandemic spending in 2019 ($19.6 billion) (Arora).” This is the reason why American Express continues to support the holiday and is the reason why it continues to grow in popularity. Even during the pandemic, American Express advertised and held the holiday while promoting local businesses and convincing customers to shop online to avoid spreading COVID-19. Even after a decade of its existence, Small Business Saturday still provides local businesses with an opportunity to survive and grow.

To understand how important this holiday is to American Express, we can look at how they have marketed this event over the years. With Small Business Saturday being an integral part of American Express’s brand, the company does a lot to promote it. You can see this with the ads that they run every year as talked about above. Every year before the holiday Amex runs ads to try and promote and raise awareness for the event. Most of these ads you see on TV involve shots of local businesses nationwide and interviews with their owners. Amex felt that people need to hear directly from small businesses to humanize them and separate them from big stores like Walmart. They make the advertisements emotional through the use of music and imagery.
They want viewers to realize the importance of shopping small and they figured that this could not be done without putting small businesses in the spotlight within the ads. Amex does a lot of other advertising for the holiday. For example, in 2022, the company partnered with the popular social media site, TikTok, to promote the holiday to a younger audience. These partnerships help raise awareness for the holiday and to support this, here is a quote about why Amex chose to partner with TikTok, “According to the 2022 Shop Small® Impact Study from American Express, 72% of small business owners said their customers rely on social media channels for store news, and almost 88% said it has helped them find their new customers (Wolfson).” As told in this quote, advertising for this holiday is extremely important not just for American Express, but also for small businesses. Amex already has a recognizable brand; however local businesses need to raise brand awareness and TikTok allows someone to do that without the need for a big advertising budget. They can make a video promoting their store and post it without any hassle. This partnership with TikTok involved many promotions and deals, one of which gave small businesses a free $100 in advertising spending on TikTok if you spend $50. This gave small businesses the ability to buy more ad space on TikTok without spending more money to try and compete with bigger brands that have a bigger budget. This TikTok partnership is not the only promotion with another company that Amex used to promote the holiday. American Express has relied on these partnerships to raise awareness and participation for the event.

Over the years, American Express has also partnered with many different companies to provide small businesses with resources for their store. For example, American Express has partnered with Indeed and FedEx to help give deals to local businesses ahead of the holiday. They partnered with Indeed to give local businesses more resources that help in promoting their brand and work environment. They teamed up with FedEx to “receive discounts on eligible FedEx® shipping and FedEx Office® services (The Shop Small Resource Hub).” These promotions with other corporations have allowed for the growth of the holiday and for American Express as a company. They have partnered with many companies over the years which allows them to create good relations with other businesses. American Express also
provides a lot of resources to local businesses through their website. On their website, you can find a section all about Small Business Saturday with many resources small businesses can use. These resources are available year-round, however, in the lead-up to the holiday, Amex updates them and adds more options to choose from. When you navigate their website, there is a section called “The Shop Small Resource Hub.” In this hub, you can find many things including a map that shows all the small businesses that are partnered with Amex so you can easily find them. Local stores can easily apply to be on this map which helps people recognize that this store is participating in Small Business Saturday. There is also a section where you can find hundreds of downloadable marketing materials for small businesses. These include templates for social media posts, flyers that promote the Shop Small initiative, and many other materials that are similar. As you can see, American Express puts a lot of money and resources into this holiday every year to help promote the event, as well as to help local businesses be prepared for it. This has raised the public’s trust in the company because of all the resources it provides for small businesses.

Another question one may have about Small Business Saturday is why is it on the day after Black Friday and two days before Cyber Monday. The reason for this is that American Express knew that the holiday would be best if it was during the holiday season and they also knew that if they could contrast the other two holidays where you give money to big corporations with a holiday where you give money to local businesses that need it more, then they could convince people to spend money on that Saturday instead of the Friday or Monday. People feel good about themselves if they know they are giving money to someone who needs it and Small Business Saturday gives them that alternative compared to the other two big spending holidays around that time. Having the event on the Saturday after Thanksgiving also gives more opportunities for local stores to get as much business as possible because most people are likely on a break from work and school. This has led to the holiday becoming a staple event alongside Black Friday and Cyber Monday.
When this public relations campaign was first created, American Express made it clear who the holiday was for. Through their advertisements and promotional material, it was clear that Small Business Saturday was meant to support all local businesses that help the communities around them. Amex wanted to show how important local businesses are to their company and after the recession in 2008, they felt that was the perfect opportunity to do so. American Express is unique compared to other credit card companies because they get most of their revenue from processing fees charged to businesses that accept Amex. This means that Amex relies on businesses to allow customers to use American Express cards so they can gain revenue. So, Small Business Saturday helps the company get more local stores to add American Express cards as a way to pay. This is another reason why the company decided to make the focus of their public relations campaign local, small businesses because all the big chain stores already accept American Express cards. This shows how this public relations campaign is not just meant to help local businesses, it is also helpful to American Express and their business. To understand why this is important to public relations, we can look at a quote from author Jim Macnamara that says, “The two most enduring of the original four models of public relations and Excellence theory, which has been described as the ‘dominant paradigm’ of public relations, emphasize two-way interaction between organizations and their publics (Macnamara 147).” This quote talks about how important it is for public relations to have open two-way communication between the company and its public. In relation to Small Business Saturday, American Express has given the outline for what the holiday is and where you should shop, however, local communities still reserve the right to mold Small Business Saturday into a community event. People can reach out to American Express for resources and help for the holiday, while communities give back to American Express by allowing their credit cards to be accepted at their local stores. This is not just a transaction between two parties, it is a two-way communication that ends up helping both parties involved.

After the first Small Business Saturday in 2010, many organizations stepped in to help continue the success of the holiday. The Small Business Association started cosponsoring the event in 2011 and has been a part of since then. In 2022, the Women Impacting Public Policy (WIPP)
also joined as a sponsor of the holiday with the organization promoting local businesses run by women. Amex has also partnered with the U.S. Black Chambers, Inc. to help support locally black-owned businesses during the holiday and year-round. There is a section on American Express’s website that is dedicated to supporting black-owned businesses and it was created with the help of the U.S. Black Chambers, Inc. Amex partners with these organizations to help promote the holiday and to get outside help when deciding what aspects of local businesses and communities need more representation and resources. The company also gets support from these organizations because, “In addition to adhering to federal guidelines, advertising and public relations industries self-regulate according to their respective trade organizations’ ethical standards. The aforementioned Public Relations Society of America as well as the International Association of Business Communicators have established codes of ethics for their members that encourage truthful, accurate communication and avoid deceptive practices (Schauster, Niell 49).” This shows how American Express needs outside help from organizations to keep them from trying to make the holiday into a way of making Amex money. There are no laws that require Amex to keep Small Business Saturday as a public relations campaign instead of making it into a way to purely advertise their company. Co-sponsoring the event with nonprofits and other organizations helps the event continue to be a public relations campaign and shows its public that Amex considers this campaign as an increasingly important holiday for them.

Even though Small Business Saturday is widely loved and thought of as a successful public relations campaign, there are plenty of people who consider it a hypocritical holiday meant for American Express to gain customers and revenue. The opposition to the event says that it is hypocritical for such a big corporation to be the ones promoting and running the holiday with a local Japanese craft store owner (Barb Campell) stating, “Every Saturday should be Small Business Saturday, but the irony of American Express being the ones to sponsor Small Business Saturday is glaring (Mandelbaum).” Many small businesses do not want help from Amex. They feel that the big company trying to help is belittling them. They think that a smaller nonprofit should be the one in charge of the holiday. Another gripe that small business owners have with
Small Business Saturday is that Amex takes a fee from them when customers use an American Express card. To the owners, this feels unfair and, again, hypocritical because American Express is taking money away from the small businesses that it claims to be helping. Over the years as the holiday has become more popular, there has been an increase in opposition to the event. This opposition has tried to learn as much as possible about Small Business Saturday to try and expose it. For example, here is a quote that talks about the potential reason why American Express chose to launch the campaign in 2010, “The first Small Business Saturday, in 2010, occurred the month after the Justice Department filed suit against American Express, MasterCard, and Visa over the card companies’ merchant rules. MasterCard and Visa settled; American Express is fighting that suit (Mandelbaum).” If Amex was trying to use Small Business Saturday as a way to make the company look good after this lawsuit, then that would generate distrust for the company as well as anger towards the holiday. Even though this event has outgrown the company that created it, there are still people trying to expose American Express for their potential wrongdoings towards the holiday.

After this analysis of the Small Business Saturday public relations campaign, there is still one unanswered question, Was this campaign successful? Yes, it was tremendously successful. American Express created Small Business Saturday as a way to help locally-owned businesses after the 2008 recession and it has since become a national holiday celebrated by all 50 states. In my hometown, every year on the day of the holiday, the downtown area promotes shopping small with the town green having small pop-up shops that people can shop at. They also have a band playing music to attract people to the green. Small Business Saturday has become a town event and growing up I originally thought that the holiday was only celebrated in our town. The reason I shared this is because I wanted to show how much the holiday means to local communities. This event is not like Black Friday or Cyber Monday. Communities rally together to celebrate their locally owned businesses and it creates opportunities for small businesses to show how they stand out compared to big corporations. Ever since it became recognized by the U.S. Senate, the holiday has grown into a day that celebrates community where towns gather to support each other. American Express has continued to support the holiday and provide small
businesses with plentiful resources and deals. This combination of help from American Express and local towns has garnered a significant amount of awareness and respect for the holiday by the public.

American Express is known for being a credit card company that differs from the rest in how it operates. This has led them to be creative when coming up with ways to advertise or generate buzz about the company. However, no advertisement or marketing campaign comes close to the success Amex has had with its public relations campaign, Small Business Saturday. If you ask someone about the holiday, chances are they will not know that it was created by American Express. No other public relations campaign has grown to become something more than the company that created it. Not many other public relations campaigns have been endorsed and supported by the president of the United States. All this shows the importance of this holiday to the company, but more importantly to its public. American Express has gained more credibility and trust from this campaign compared to anything else they have done in the past. This holiday will only continue to grow and garner more awareness. Small Business Saturday is a staple for American Express as well as a staple holiday within our country and there are not many, if any, other public relations campaigns that can say the same.
Work Cited


