

Flashy Tech Company Mesmerizes Small Town

Precis: This report will cover the Gryzzl events in Pawnee, Indiana from 2015 through 2017. It will assess how the town reacted to the presence of the company and the decisions, both good and bad, that Gryzzl made throughout the three year period.

Background

Gryzzl is a high-tech corporation that came to Pawnee, Indiana in 2015. They were offering free Wi-Fi to high-profile cities, like Chicago and New York, but the Pawnee city manager, Ben Wyatt, intended to convince them to consider his town. In November of 2014, Gryzzl got their start with their music service called “Gryzzl Dump”, and a couple months later they had already accumulated a user base of over 170 million people (Daniels, Klein & Schur)¹. They then went on to become a massive internet and Wi-Fi provider that quickly spiraled into a multimedia company, making everything from smartphones to tablets that double as makeshift skateboards. When Wyatt first met with the CEO of Gryzzl, Mike Bean, Bean told him that before Gryzzl started, he “was working in a taco truck. Now [he] owns one third of the Portland Trail Blazers”(Daniels, Klein & Schur, 2015)². Bean, along with the other employees at Gryzzl could all be seen sporting fairly casual attire. Bean himself wasn’t even wearing shoes when he met with Wyatt. At one point, he told Wyatt, “we don’t like to say the word ‘no’ at this company. We feel it’s counterproductive to our creative mission”(Daniels, Klein & Schur)³. The entire

¹ Season 6, Episode 21 Daniels, G., Klein, H. & Schur, M. (Producers) (2015, January 13). *Parks and Recreation* [Television Broadcast]. NBC

² Season 6, Episode 21 Daniels, G., Klein, H. & Schur, M. (Producers) (2015, January 13). *Parks and Recreation* [Television Broadcast]. NBC

³ Season 6, Episode 21 Daniels, G., Klein, H. & Schur, M. (Producers) (2015, January 13). *Parks and Recreation* [Television Broadcast]. NBC

essence of the company was incredibly relaxed and high-tech. Even the vice president of Gryzzl, Roscoe Santangelo, had some eccentric qualities to his working environment. In a meeting with some local business partners, Santangelo introduced himself as “the vice president of cool new shizz”(Daniels, Klein & Schur, 2015)⁴. Santangelo was also walking on a treadmill in his office, while his guests sat on yoga balls.

Situation

In 2017, Gryzzl was caught in a data mining scandal that made many citizens of Pawnee seriously question the ethics of the company. The accusations of data mining were confirmed when the vice president openly described “Gryzzl’s 1984-style operating system, which reads emails, texts, [and] medical records”(Goldstein, 2015)⁵. A Wired article by Laura Hudson also commented on the tech company’s “willingness to progressively erode the privacy of their customers, stopping only when their new initiatives are egregiously creepy enough to spake a wave of bad PR”(Hudson, 2015)⁶. This was an especially poor time for Gryzzl to have bad PR in Pawnee because this was the same time that they were trying to purchase a plot of land from the Newports, a wealthy family that was considered a household name in the town. Not only that, but the CEO of Gryzzl, Mike Bean, mentioned that there may be some issues with the new software. When he meets with Jessica Newport, the owner of the Newport land, he gives her a brand new tablet as a gift, but suggests that she “should shut her device off before going to

⁴ Season 7, Episode 3 Daniels, G., Klein, H. & Schur, M. (Producers) (2015, January 13). *Parks and Recreation* [Television Broadcast]. NBC

⁵ Goldstein, J. (2015, January 27). *Parks and recreation recap: Definitely not chill*. Vulture. Retrieved March 2, 2022, from <https://www.vulture.com/2015/01/parks-and-recap-season-7-episode-5.html>

⁶ Hudson, L. (2015, February 25). *How parks and recreation took aim at Silicon Valley*. Wired. Retrieved March 2, 2022, from <https://www.wired.com/2015/02/parks-rec-tech-culture/>

sleep”(Galazka, 2020)⁷. But they weren’t the only ones interested in the Newport land. The Parks and Recreation department in Pawnee, specifically its Midwest Regional Parks Director, Leslie Knope, was eager to convince the Newports to donate the land to them so that they could turn it into a national park. Despite Gryzzl offering the Newports over a hundred million dollars for the land, because they were in cold water with the town, it wasn’t guaranteed that they’d win over the Parks department. Knope offered the Newports a convincing argument, saying that donating the land and turning it into a national park would preserve the Newport legacy. The Newports seemed torn for a moment, but then Gryzzl upped their bid to one hundred and twenty five million dollars, and the Newports accepted. However, Knope and the Parks department later convince Gryzzl to donate the land to them and build their campus in Beachview terrace instead. Beachview Terrace, a run-down and abandoned part of town, still had buildings with strong foundations that would be easier (and cheaper) to build a new campus on rather than building from scratch. This ultimately was the better decision for Gryzzl because the donating of the land restored their image with the public as well as saved them money.

I chose this time frame because Gryzzl takes on a variety of business tactics, both positive and negative. Gryzzl “using deep data mining to send creepy personalized gifts to sway Pawnee citizens in its favor”(Hardawar, 2021)⁸ was definitely not a smart move from a public relations perspective. While it may have helped gather a more individualized profile on each customer, the town did not like having Gryzzl snooping around in their personal lives.

⁷ Galazka, K. (2020, September 2). *How "Parks and recreation" created a Futuristic Pawnee*. BuzzFeed. Retrieved March 10, 2022, from

<https://www.buzzfeed.com/kasiagalazka/parks-and-recreation-farewell-season-gadgets>

⁸ Hardawar, D. (2021, May 13). *NBC's 'Parks and recreation' puts data privacy under the comic lens*. Engadget. Retrieved March 10, 2022, from

<https://www.engadget.com/2015-02-07-parks-and-recreation-privacy.html>

Gryzzl deciding to donate the land was a huge boost for their public image. Coming directly after the data mining scandal, Gryzzl needed a big action that would make up for them breaking the trust of the people of Pawnee. Not only that, but financially it worked out better as well. They had already spent over a hundred million dollars to purchase the land, and they would've easily spent double that to pay for the construction of the campus. Beachview Terrace already had a foundation of old buildings they could work with, which would save them a ton of money and resources. So, while the data mining was definitely a failure on Gryzzl's part, the donation of the land and the renovation of Beachview Terrace was a major ethical and financial success.

Events

- Gryzzl installing free Wi-Fi in town - 2015
 - This obviously boosts Gryzzl's relationship with Pawnee. They are already hugely profitable at this point, so making the Wi-Fi free isn't that much of a deficit. Plus, the fact that now they can set up shop in the town to promote their devices and tech will make up any of the revenue they lost ten fold.
- Gryzzl sending Gryzzlboxes (Data mining) - 2017
 - The townsfolk find out that Gryzzl has been searching their texts and emails for information on them, which should be illegal, however, Gryzzl snuck in an amendment into the bylaws of the contract that gave them the right to data mine. This is where people start turning on Gryzzl because of their poor business decisions.
- Gryzzl offers over \$100 million to the Newport family to purchase their land - 2017

- Gryzzl wants to build a new company campus in Pawnee, and they have the money to do it. The only problem is, they are competing with the Parks department for the land and are already in some hot water because of the data mining scandal.
- Gryzzl donates the land to the Parks and Recreation service and renovates Beachview Terrace for their new campus - 2017
 - Donating the land to the Parks department was a good PR move for Gryzzl. Because of this they get some much needed good press. As for their plans for a new campus, the decision to renovate an abandoned part of the town is great too because it revitalizes the space and since there are already buildings there they don't have to spend as much money on construction.

Narrative

Gryzzl first arrived in Pawnee, Indiana in late 2014 to early 2015, when the city manager, Ben Wyatt, convinced them to provide the town with free Wi-Fi. Things all seemed to operate fairly smoothly from there, until about two years later. By this point, Gryzzl had become a major presence in Pawnee, not only supplying their Wi-Fi and internet, but many of their electronics as well. Gryzzl technology seemed integral to daily life in Pawnee, from their phones, to their televisions, to their skateboards. It seemed like Gryzzl had created a sort of monopoly in Pawnee, and they ended up taking advantage of it. After citizens of Pawnee started getting sent “Gryzzl Boxes”, which were large gift boxes delivered to people via giant drones displaying the Gryzzl logo, the townspeople started to get a strange feeling about Gryzzl. All of the gifts in the Gryzzl Boxes were oddly specific to each individual person, which led people to assume that Gryzzl was

reading their texts and emails to gather information about them. This got people extremely upset with the company, outraged that Gryzzl would invade their privacy like that. Gryzzl insisted that they were doing nothing wrong, and seemed very transparent about the fact that they were searching people's data. The city manager, Ben Wyatt, realized that "Gryzzl has been using a loophole in the agreement to freely data-mine the residents"(O'Kane, 2015)⁹. Despite this being immoral and sneaky, the loophole technically made Gryzzl's actions legal. Wyatt claimed, however, that although what the company was doing was not illegal, it was definitely not an admirable action. On a local talk show, Wyatt directly addressed Gryzzl's vice president, Roscoe Santangelo, saying "A person should not have to have an advanced law degree to avoid being taken advantage of by a multi-billion dollar company. You should be upfront about what you're doing, and allow people the ability to opt out" (Daniels, Klein & Schur, 2015)¹⁰. After that, Gryzzl agreed to stop searching people's emails, and, as an apology, sent all of the townspeople free concert tickets as an attempt to restore their image.

This didn't quite satisfy the people of Pawnee, so when Gryzzl announced that they were planning on purchasing the Newport land, people were still skeptical about their motives. The Newports were ultimately more concerned with money than with privacy, so when Gryzzl offered them a hundred twenty five million dollars, they accepted almost immediately. This upset the Parks department, who had also been pushing for the land, but did not have any money to offer in return. As a last ditch effort to get the land, the Parks department managed to "convince the company that relocating their headquarters to a rural area [would] be much more expensive

⁹ O'Kane, S. (2015, February 25). *The future according to Parks and recreation*. The Verge. Retrieved March 2, 2022, from <https://www.theverge.com/2015/2/25/8095109/parks-and-recreation-series-finale-future-tech-vision>

¹⁰ Season 7, Episode 5 Daniels, G., Klein, H. & Schur, M. (Producers) (2015, January 13). *Parks and Recreation* [Television Broadcast]. NBC

(upwards of one hundred million dollars), than revitalizing a warehouse complex in Pawnee's Beachview Terrace district"(Andrews, 2015)¹¹. This also helped to improve Gryzzl's damaged relationship with the town, as rebuilding an abandoned part of town would draw tons of positive attention and opportunities for new business. So, in the end, Gryzzl got some great PR and a new campus for less money than they had originally intended to spend.

Conclusions and Takeaways

Gryzzl was definitely off to a rocky start with Pawnee in 2017, as the data mining situation was a bad business call. Especially the way Gryzzl tried to sneakily get away with invading their customers' privacy, that does not paint Gryzzl's ethics as a company in a positive light. A Washington Post article from 2021 talked about Gryzzl and its relationship to consumer's privacy: "Over 90 percent of American adults agree or strongly agree that consumers have lost control about how personal information is collected or used by companies"(Peterson, 2021)¹². This means that even years later, this is still a major problem. There is something to be said about the fact that this was an issue in 2017, and it has only gotten worse as time has gone by. Gryzzl could've been a great example of why data mining and invading customers' privacy can have negative after effects, but companies are still using the same tactics to get information on their users.

That being said, however, a lot of Gryzzl's marketing strategies are top-notch. For example, they mention at one point that they're developing an app with Starbucks. They also at

¹¹ Andrews, C. (2015, February 20). *Geography on set: Connecting Real Places to Parks and recreation - future GRYZZL headquarters*. Not of it. Retrieved March 10, 2022, from <http://www.cdandrews.com/2015/02/geography-on-set-connecting-real-places.html>

¹² Peterson, A. (2021, December 6). *'parks and recreation' takes on online privacy. and it hits close to home*. The Washington Post. Retrieved March 2, 2022, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2015/01/29/parks-and-recreation-takes-on-online-privacy-and-it-hits-close-to-home/>

one point recruit a celebrity investor to promote their brand. From a marketing and advertising perspective, Gryzzl is constantly finding modern and innovative ways to stay current and with the times. Their motto, for example, “Wouldn’t it be tight if everyone was chill to each other?”(Daniels, Klein & Schur, 2015)¹³ gives off a friendly and low-stress feel, which could be good for company morale. The company environment may be strange, with yoga balls for desk chairs and employees walking around barefoot, but it could also be seen as appealing and innovative.

This profile demonstrates that companies still have the capability to turn their image around after bad publicity. Even with something as serious as data mining, it is possible to win back the public, but it’s all about trust. When Gryzzl donated the land to the Parks department, that showed the people of Pawnee that they were respectful of the town and wanted to make amends. Additionally, by choosing to refurbish a run-down part of town, they demonstrated their commitment to Pawnee and its economic growth and stability. The fact that Gryzzl, the Newport family, and the Parks department all got something good out of the deal in the end shows that compromise is possible even in the business world. As long as there is communication and adequate planning, there can be advantages for all parties involved. However, this profile also highlights the importance of holding tech companies accountable for their wrongdoings. Now that issues like data mining are even more prevalent, people need to speak up about how unethical it really is. Looking forward, the general public needs to have more say in the policies of these giant multimedia conglomerates, otherwise it’s easy for them to misuse their power. There are so many present day examples of companies just like Gryzzl: Google, Meta, Amazon, just to name a few. These corporations are monopolizing the market, which gives them the

¹³ Daniels, G., Klein, H. & Schur, M. (Producers) (2015, January 13). *Parks and Recreation* [Television Broadcast]. NBC

ability to manipulate their consumers. Gryzzl argued during the data mining scandal that people don't have to use their technology if they don't want to, but in today's world that is next to impossible. If a company is big enough, they can be the only option for people in a world that can no longer survive without the use of technology and media.

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