



CAP 320: CASE STUDY  
PROFESSOR WOLFE

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# MISS AMERICA 2.0

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## Background

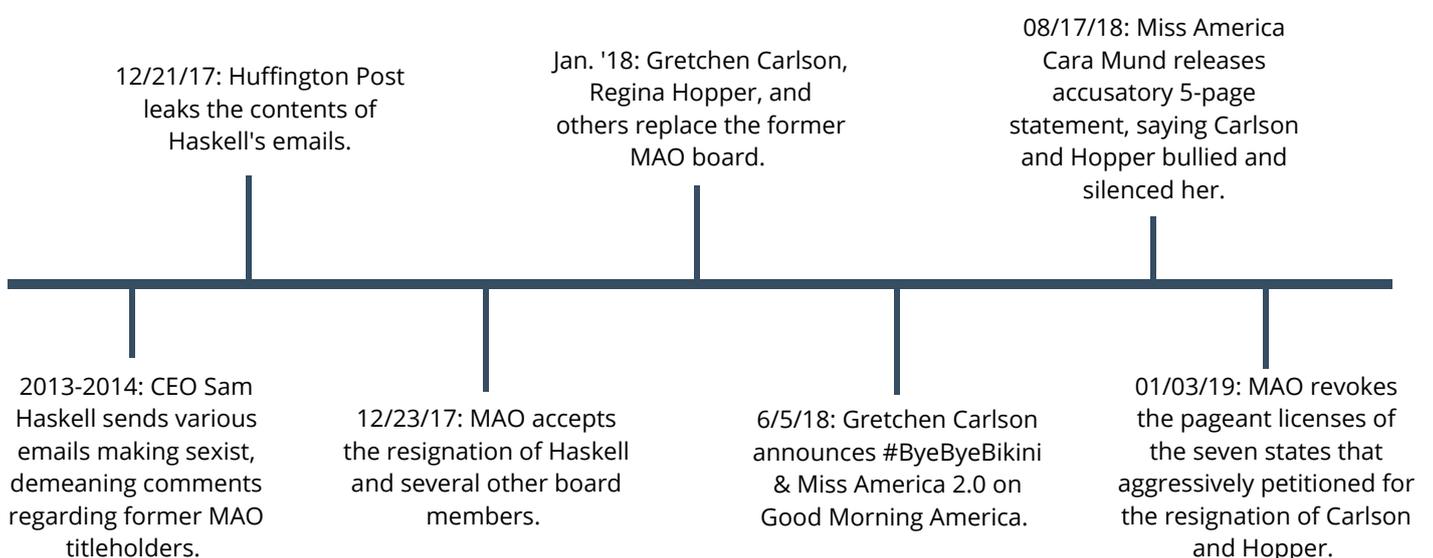
The Miss America Organization (also referred to as MAO) planted its roots in 1921 when a group of hotel owners in the Atlantic City, New Jersey area attempted to find a way to extend the tourism season into the fall. Their efforts produced a 'bathing beauty' contest, where the winner- determined by her body measurements and proportions- would be named 'The Most Beautiful Bathing Girl in America'.

Of course, over the near century that it has been in existence, MAO has evolved in efforts to remain socially relevant. These efforts have brought with them a plethora of challenges and issues. For instance, second-wave feminism of the 1960's brought hundreds of protestors to the boardwalk in Atlantic City, forming what's now known as the bra-burning protests of 1968. Feminism was not the only challenge facing MAO. Many felt that racism played an influential role in the organization as well, even after the first African-American Miss America, Vanessa Williams, was crowned in 1983.

The organization has had its fair share of scandals as well. Vanessa Williams, mentioned above, was required to resign from her position as Miss America after nude photographs of her were leaked in PENTHOUSE magazine. More recently, the organization's longtime CEO, Sam Haskell, resigned from his position after emails containing sexist remarks regarding former titleholders were made public. Those who took Haskell's place, Gretchen Carlson (current chairwoman of the board of directors) and Regina Hopper (current CEO and president) have created a Civil War within the Miss America Organization: The #ByeByeBikini campaign, and Miss America 2.0.

This report will analyze the new pageant format (also referred to as 2.0), the ways that the campaign was executed effectively and the potential ways that the campaign could have been executed even more effectively under Carlson and Hopper. Although there are many elements of MAO's past that play into this case study, for the sake of simplicity, this report will focus on 2013-present, starting with Sam Haskell's email scandal.

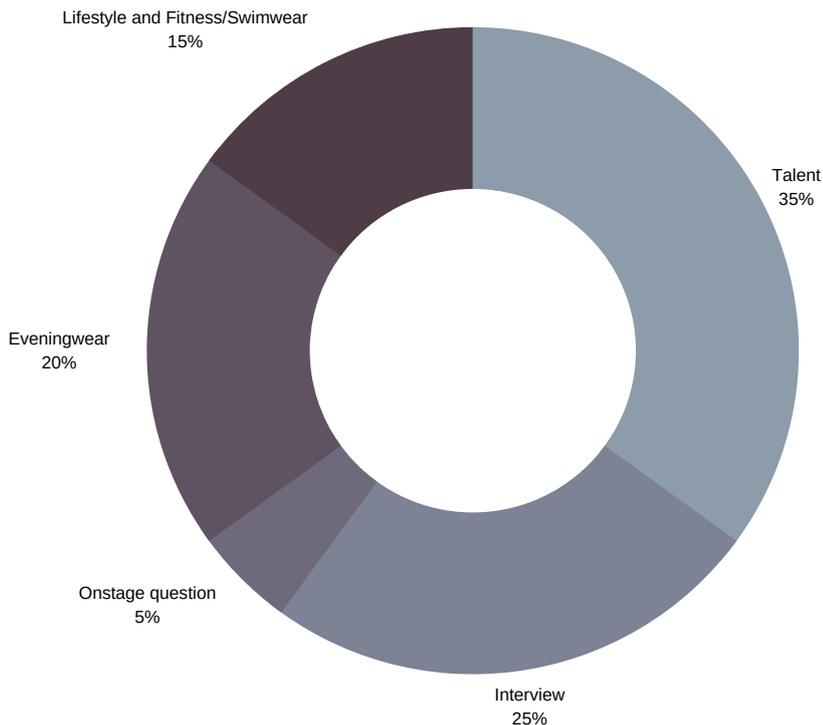
## Timeline



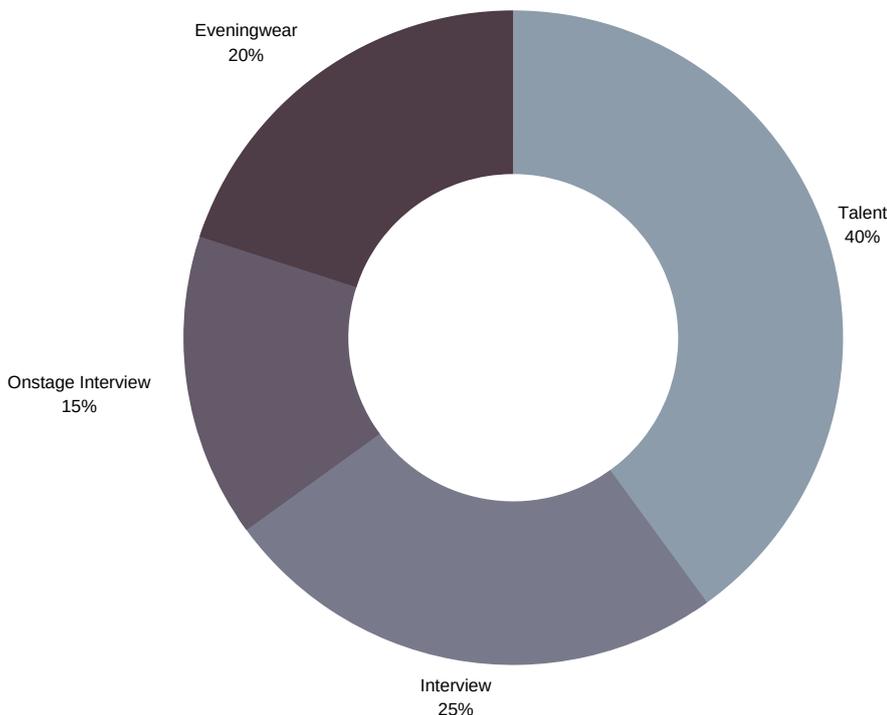
## What is Miss America 2.0?

"We are no longer a pageant, we are a competition. We will no longer judge our candidates on their outward physical appearance." These groundbreaking words from Gretchen Carlson on June 5th, 2018 spelled the end of the swimsuit competition in MAO pageants, as well as a variety of other changes.

### Old Judging Criteria



### New (2.0) Judging Criteria\*



**\*Note:** 2.0 judging criteria vary on local, state, and national levels, as well as on preliminary/final nights of competition. Criteria shown are for local competition.

## Partnerships

### SHERRI HILL



#### **Sherri Hill**

In an August 9, 2018 press release, the Miss America Organization announced that they would begin a 3-year partnership with Sherri Hill, making it the official dress sponsor of the organization from now until the organization's centennial in 2021. Sherri Hill is also the official dress sponsor of the Miss Universe pageant, and its preliminary pageant, Miss USA. In its press release, MAO CEO Regina Hopper said: "Sherri Hill exemplifies excellence and elegance and the Miss America Organization is thrilled that Cara, Miss Americas 2019, 2020 and 2021 will have the opportunity to not just wear these beautiful gowns in their jobs but advance their chosen work for the year as a part of this partnership."

#### **Dick Clark Productions**

The Miss America Organization had partnered with Dick Clark Productions for several years, beginning with the 2015 Miss America Telecast. According to a 2014 article by The Hollywood Reporter, Dick Clark Productions handled all of the "creative, marketing, sponsorship, ticketing and distribution elements" for the 2015 pageant.

When Haskell's emails were leaked in December of 2017, Dick Clark Productions cut their ties with the Miss America Organization, saying that they "were appalled by their unacceptable content... We resigned our board positions and notified MAO that we were terminating our relationship with them."

#### **CMN Hospitals**

Though MAO has gained and lost partnerships since the announcement of Miss America 2.0, they've kept a consistent partnership with CMN Hospitals. According to the Miss America website, MAO has raised over \$16 billion for Children's Miracle Network Hospitals to date across all 52 licensed organizations (50 U.S. states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia). Contestants are required to raise a certain amount of money for their local and state pageant "entry fees", and are encouraged to attend local hospitals, CMN events (such as iHOP and Dairy Queen CMN fundraisers) in order to strengthen and promote this partnership and raise money for Children's Miracle Network Hospitals.

## R.A.C.E

### Research

When the new Miss America board of directors created, implemented and announced the Miss America 2.0 pageant format, there was a significant lack of research conducted in order to ensure that the new format was well-received. In hindsight, this lack of research is what led to the internal Civil War still prevalent in the organization. The new MAO leadership did not consult their many stakeholders that held valuable opinions and advice regarding the new format. These stakeholders include:

- State and local pageant directors nationwide, who were required to implement the new format within a year's time (The new format was first used during the Miss America 2019 competition, and is still being introduced at each state-level pageant, and will then be introduced into local pageants).
- Former and present titleholders, who may be required to compete using this new format.
- The thousands of volunteers, ranging from local to national levels, who ensure that the organization is running smoothly.
- The fans/viewers, many of whom have watched Miss America for years, and have a vested interest in the organization and want to see it advance and succeed.



An example of how MAO could have performed their research would be to replicate the research they conducted in 1995. As the pageant struggled to maintain their social relevancy throughout the 90's, they decided to have their viewers vote on whether or not they wanted to keep the swimsuit portion of competition in the pageant. The viewers voted to keep swimsuit in the pageant. This made stakeholders feel like their opinion was valued, and gave the organization a new level of social relevance, letting their audience decide what was valuable/important to them.

### Action

In addition to research, during their transition/rebrand, the Miss America Organization was also lacking a consistent action plan. In an organization that has operated the same way for as long as its volunteers can remember, this change required a concrete, specific plan in order for information to be passed down the hierarchy with minimal confusion or frustration. However, as the organization made its future intentions known, it became clear that there was no plan. The national board of directors left state and local directors in the dark regarding how they were to run their next pageant, and contestants were equally confused regarding how and what to prepare. These internal communication issues only frustrated MAO stakeholders more amidst scandal after scandal.

## Communication

As hinted at earlier, the lack of communication is what caused the 2.0 format to be so poorly received. Carlson's June 5th announcement on Good Morning America was a surprise to everyone, including state and local directors, who had to reassure anxious contestants that they would pass on more information as soon as they received it--which would take longer than anticipated. In fact, many of the 2019 Miss America contestants had very little of an idea how they would compete when they arrived in Atlantic City for the pageant.

As in any situation where there's a lack of clear, concrete information, rumors and assumptions slowly began to spread as MAO members grew more frustrated and more anxious. Slowly, through nationwide director phone meetings with the board and pressure from all stakeholders, the information members were craving- new judging criteria, the new branding identity, and other aspects of the future of MAO- became more clear. However, the months-long delay in this information left a bad taste in many MAO-supporter's mouths.

## Evaluation

Prior to the announcement of Miss America 2.0, the organization was already struggling. Many people have a negative image of pageantry and the Miss America Organization, feeling that its dated and promotes old-timey feminine ideals. This struggle to maintain social relevancy and the Haskell email scandal that had happened only several months before made many supporters feel that it was a perfect time for a rebrand of the organization. In fact, many were excited about Gretchen Carlson taking over, since she had been Miss America in 1989, and felt that she would be the perfect person to bring Miss America into the 21st century.

However, the initial lack of internal communication, lack of regard for stakeholder input, and the slow, frustrating release of valuable information caused many to feel that this was the end of Miss America as they knew it. Many called for Carlson and Hopper to resign from their positions, especially after Miss America 2018, Cara Mund, released her 5-page statement regarding how she had been treated as a Miss America.

*"Let me be blunt: I strongly believe that my voice is not heard nor wanted by our current leadership... Our chair and CEO have systematically silenced me, reduced me, marginalized me, and essentially erased me in my role as Miss America in subtle and not-so-subtle ways on a daily basis. After a while, the patterns have clearly emerged, and the sheer accumulation of the disrespect, passive-aggressive behavior, belittlement, and outright exclusion has taken a serious toll."*

*- Official statement from Cara Mund, Miss America 2018*



## SWOT Analysis

### Strengths

- In 2021, Miss America will celebrate 100 years since its very first "bathing beauty" competition. Throughout those 100 years, the organization has built a dedicated following comprised of volunteers, contestants, and viewers/fans. The level of commitment seen in these groups of people is a strength of the organization. Despite the controversies, scandals, and the constant state of chaos reigning over MAO over the last few years, there is still a group of dedicated followers that are passionate about what the organization stands for.
- Additionally, Miss America is a recognizable household name for many, spanning different ages, races, or genders. Despite their struggle to stay relevant, they have built a cultural significance through their brand, sculpting the name of Miss America to be known nation wide.

### Weaknesses

- For much of the organization's history, many people have viewed it as anti-feminist. The 1968 bra-burning protests on the boardwalk in Atlantic City are the perfect example of how those who only see the organization from the outside feel that the women who compete are objectified and treated as sex objects, romping around the stage in bikinis and being judged based on their physical appearance.
- Similarly, thanks to reality television shows like Toddlers and Tiaras and viral internet videos of pageant contestants blubbing onstage trying to answer a simple question, a 'beauty pageant' stereotype has been formed. While this stereotype is far from representative of the contestants that compete, it is still a hurdle that the contestants, and the Miss America Organization, struggle to overcome.
- One theme of this report is MAO's struggle to keep their identity relevant. For an organization that started out as a stunt to extend the tourism season and crowned their winner based on her physical measurements, Miss America struggled to find what their identity was throughout the years. This struggle is far from over as the organization continues to search for ways to keep their identity modern and relevant.
- Like any other industry, pageantry has had its fair share of scandals. Vanessa Williams's nude photos, Sam Haskell's emails, Cara Mund's statement regarding treatment from Gretchen Carlson and Regina Hopper, controversy surrounding Donald Trump and his ownership of the Miss USA organization and many more have fed into mixed feelings about pageantry.
- As seen in the R.A.C.E portion of this report, internal communication was a huge weakness in the announcement of Miss America 2.0. There are many ways that the organization could improve in this regard, which will be discussed under Alternative Actions.

## Opportunities

- The Miss America 'crown' has four points, each standing for something: service, style, scholarship, and success. Despite how many people might see pageants as outdated, these four values are still incredibly socially relevant, and can serve as something to promote in order to keep MAO relevant.
- These four values are prevalent in other organizations as well, which opens up the door for potential partnerships. As Miss America is known to be a role model for younger girls, potential partnerships could be Girls On The Run, Girl Scouts, Boys & Girls Clubs of America, and of course, their current partnership with Children's Miracle Network Hospitals. Miss America could also partner with different organizations that value service, such as Habitat for Humanity, Rotary or Kiwanis clubs, and so on.

## Threats

- The feminism movement, which has been prevalent for many decades, is continuing to grow and evolve in new ways. Even as the organization makes efforts to align itself with feminist ideals, MAO's identity will most likely struggle with anti-feminist connotations for years to come.
- Miss America is not the only well-known pageant organization. Miss USA is their main 'competitor' in the public eye, although both organizations are very different. Other pageant organizations, from the national level down to local festival-style pageants, may present a threat to the Miss America Organization.
- A large threat to the Miss America Organization is the 'beauty queen' stereotype, created by reality TV shows like 'Toddlers and Tiaras'. Although this stereotype of blonde, brainless, smiley girls in crowns is everything that MAO is trying to rebrand against, this stereotype still exists in many people's minds, and MAO will have to fight hard for people to view it differently.



## Alternative Actions

No organization is perfect, and when it's endured various scandals, the resignation of an entire board of directors, and the poor leadership of a new board of directors, it only makes change more difficult. However, there are a variety of different actions that MAO leadership could have taken to ensure a smooth transition of power, and restored trust from their key audiences.

- Listen to stakeholders. As mentioned earlier, in 1995, MAO had pageant viewers vote to keep or get rid of the swimsuit phase of competition. This ensured that viewers felt heard and appreciated, and also that the pageant was socially relevant and contained content that viewers actually wanted to see. Replicating this in 2018, even if it meant only consulting state and local directors to have them help decide what the new format would hold, would have helped MAO stay relevant and improve feelings towards the organization.
- Have a clear plan before releasing information. Even once MAO leadership did have a plan for 2.0, it felt hasty and incomplete, as if it had been thrown together at the last minute. State and local directors were left wondering how 2.0 would affect them, and their questions and requests for more information were left unanswered. This frustration could have been avoided had MAO leadership fully developed their plan before releasing it, ensuring that all necessary information was crafted before releasing anything at all.
- Have a secure transfer of information down the hierarchy. Along with creating a clear plan, there was no solid communication channel where national leadership could get information to all state directors. This led to rumors and assumptions that only made the process more complicated in the end.
- Have a crisis plan prepared for potential backlash. With change in any organization, there's likely to be pushback. When you're changing the structure of a 97-year-old tradition, that pushback is absolutely inevitable. Preparing a PR plan-social media, press tactics, and so on-could calm audience's anxieties before they become a bigger problem.

Miss  
America  
2.0<sup>2019</sup>

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