

# **At What Point Does Using Human Nature In Business Strategy Become Unethical? The Case of Ashley Madison**

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## **Abstract**

Studying the tendencies of human behavior to develop techniques that encourage customers to make purchases is the essence of marketing. However, at some point there is a line crossed where many people will be troubled by such techniques/strategies if the service or product is something that could actually be detrimental to the customer or people related to the customer. To explore where this line is crossed, this case uses the example of Ashley Madison to explore the ethical implications of exploiting human nature for business purposes. The product offered by Ashley Madison is a website created as a clearing house for people who are married yet wish to find willing partners to engage in infidelity. The site was launched in 2001, and had the slogan, "Life is Short, Have an Affair" ([www.AshleyMadison.com](http://www.AshleyMadison.com)). It is believed at one point to have had a membership of over 39 million people in 53 countries (Woo 2013). Membership dropped after a large scale computer hack allowed client lists, marketing activities and its daily operations to become public knowledge.

We have identified the following eight issues to address in the context of the principle of the "Common Good" as it relates to this company's business strategy.

**Issue 1: A Clearing House for Cheaters: Is This Different from a Firm that Potentially Caters to Other Human Vices?**

**Issue 2: Using Elements of Indirect Subterfuge as a Tool of Advertising: At What Point Is It Dishonesty?**

**Issue 3: Duping Others to Advertise Your Service by Exploiting Their Vanity and Propensity to Engage In "Virtue Signaling": Does a Firm Have a Responsibility for Another Organization's Foibles?**

**Issue 4: Intentionally Offering a Service to a Gullible/Desperate Demographic.**

**Issue 5: Implied Promise to Deliver Something That is Not Real: Do Some People Deserve to Be "Cat Fished?"**

**Issue 6: Allowing Clients to Hide Charges on Their Credit Card by Using a Different Billing Name: Is the Cover Up Just as Immoral as the Underlying Action?**

**Issue 7: There Was a Special Fee for Disconnecting and Deleting all Information After client Unsubscribed: Can Blackmail Be Legal and Ethical?**

**Issue 8: Failing to Deliver on the Record Cleaning Promise: Should There Be Honor Among Thieves?**