

Graphic Designers' Greenwashing

A Perspective from 2004

Are graphic designers responsible for making brands appear to be what they ain't? Or does function follow form? Can a green, responsible or altruistic branding program come first, with better corporate behavior to follow?

On Earth Day, April 22, 2004, the lead article on the Op-Ed page of the New York Times was titled, "Marketing Earth Day Inc." Written by the director of an environmental agency, the article opened: "Welcome to Earth Day 2004, brought to you by petroleum powers, big-box developers, old-growth loggers, and chemically dependent coffee companies trying to paint their public image green. Through concerted marketing and public relations campaigns, these greenwashers attract eco-conscious consumers and push the notion that they don't need environmental regulation because they already are environmentally responsible."

Are we designers, so committed to saving the environment by, say, specifying soy inks on recycled paper, unintentional greenwashers whose work can make environmental sinners look like saints?

The word "greenwash," the dictionary tells us, is formed from two existing words, "green," committed to the environment, and "whitewash," a deliberate attempt by concealment to clear the reputation of a person or institution.

Do we "brand" what a company is, or what it promises to become? Does our work in logo, packaging and advertising design sometimes make us guilty of helping conceal a client's past record and true intentions?

And, please, I don't profess to judge the profession or know the answers to these thorny questions. Only to raise them. We all need work. Especially now, when there is hardly anyone on the planet who is not a graphic designer, how many of us wouldn't jump at the opportunity to rebrand a multinational, or even local, corporation, especially if its mission statement includes a bold environmental-protection promise?

On message boards, citizens decry such "green propaganda" as oil company ads that show oceans and coastlines and use keywords like "sustainable development" and "renewable resources," when, it's alleged, they're responsible for hugely damaging oil spills. "If you see an advertiser going out of its way to project a clean image, ask yourself why," suggests one pundit, who asserts that energy industries spend millions trying to deceive people in places like West African villages, claiming that their wells and refineries can peacefully coexist with local communities without damaging their way of life or their health. Few industries are immune from this type of reproof. Not only petrochemicals, automobile and tobacco,

By Ellen Shapiro
Commarts.com

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but apparel, footwear, food, beverages, even travel. We are urged to avoid fake eco-travel operators that run tours that don't conserve the environment or improve the welfare of native peoples. Increasingly under fire are companies such as Nike, the Gap and Starbucks, accused of abusing third-world laborers. Don't let the soy latte on the menu fool you, we are advised; Starbucks exploits child labor in coffee-growing countries.

Needless to say, these companies are all leading

sources of design firm and ad agency billings and creative achievements.

The entire automotive industry is lambasted for resisting the reclassification of minivans and SUVs from less-regulated light trucks for commercial use to "what they really are: highly profitable, gas-guzzling personal transport." The Sierra Club blasts GM, in particular, for "failing to meet one of America's key environmental laws and engaging instead in a scam to achieve technical compliance."

No company has been under more fire than BP. Created in 1998 from the former British Petroleum, Amoco, Atlantic Richfield (ARCO) and Burmah Castrol, \$230 billion BP has been repeatedly singled out for spending \$7 million on its new identity, designed by Landor Associates, and \$25 million each quarter for implementation, mainly signage and advertising. Here's how the logo is described on BP's Web site:

"A vibrant sunburst of green, white and yellow. Green for environmental responsibility. Yellow representing the sun. Called the Helios mark after the sun god of ancient Greece, the Logo is intended to exemplify dynamic energy in all its forms, from oil and gas to solar—that the company delivers to its ten million daily customers around the world."

Perhaps falling into the greenwashing trap, the design press lauded the new identity. "The objective of the branding program was to reposition BP from a petroleum company to one that is focused on natural energies—wind, water and sun," wrote a guest columnist in this magazine. "Landor did more than redesign BP's identity and visual communications. They guided BP executives to first redefine their corporate values and change the very culture of their global offices."

Is that true? It is an elegantly designed mark. There is no denying that the world (or at least the urban thoroughfare) is a more attractive place with the clean, green BP "look" on gas stations rather than ugly old Amoco.

Did BP truly refine its corporate values? Or is the company still in the business of pulling oil out of the

ground and selling it? And pulling the wool over the public's eyes?

Greenwashing has gotten so out of control," says an environmental attorney, "that the ethics of those contributing to misleading advertising and promotional work are in question." A financial profile indicates that oil exploration and production account for 80% of BP's activities, and gas and alternative energy for only 3%. Hmm. The theme of BP's 2003 annual report is: "It starts here," and the CEO writes: "Good financial performance is not enough. We have to demonstrate that we can be a successful company in the long term, making a meaningful contribution to a sustainable world."

That sounds nice, but how to get at the truth? It's nearly impossible. In one camp are the corporate spinmasters, who say things like, "BP stands for our aspirations: Better People, Better Products, Big Picture, Beyond Petroleum." And in the other are the muckrakers who shout: "Big Polluter!"

Do we just have to wait and see if the company lives up to its promise, as some participants in the lively discussion on brandchannel.com have suggested?

"I don't think you can get at the truth in any real sense," admits an environmental practice partner in an international law firm, who requests anonymity. "In my view, greenwashing has gotten so out of control, the ethics of everyone in the loop—all those contributing to misleading advertising and promotional work—are in question," she says. "The claims aren't exactly false, but they are deceptive because they represent a tiny fraction of what is true."

If an environmental attorney can't figure out the truth, how can we? And then there are the economic necessities of our businesses, just like hers. Wouldn't all of us love to work on long-term, global design programs like BP's rebranding, which are where the big bucks are? Wouldn't you want a contract for helping maintain the "external expressions of the brand," the pristine white and green oil tanks and trucks pictured in Alina Wheeler's *Designing Brand Identity*? Or art directing the colorful new *BPMagazine*, with its upbeat articles about clean energy in Hong Kong and Argentina?

Not me, you say? Well, maybe. Why not?

We all do like to win awards, that's for sure. Whether they're art directors' club medals or inclusion in the *CA Design Annual* or *Advertising Annual*. Certain clients, however, garner another kind of award. Among the worst-in-category tributes

bestowed on BP is Earth Day 2000's Greenwash Award: "Of all the oil giants, BP has most carefully crafted its image to appear concerned about the environment, out-greenwashing stiff competition, including Chevron, Exxon, Mobil and Shell."

What agency or design firm wouldn't want the Nike account, or just a piece of the business? On Napster-like sites, we can download Nike commercials, they're so cool. The spots directed by Spike Lee for Air Jordan XVIs featuring L.A. Clippers stars are the subject of a review on *espn.com*: "Shot in dramatic black and white, like jazz photographs, the court feels like a club... [the look] echoes the graphics and color schemes of Blue Note Records, the label that was the essence of cool."

Nike, however, is accused of grossly misrepresenting its employment record—in a case that's gone all the way

to the Supreme Court. "In a lawsuit that could have far-reaching implications for corporate greenwashing campaigns," reported *Mother Jones* magazine, "a San Francisco man will take on Nike Inc. over its public claims about conditions in its Asian factories—factories that the company's critics call sweatshops."

The lawsuit, *Kasky v. Nike Inc.*, reached the U.S. Supreme Court in 2003, and was bounced back to California

Supreme Court, where environmental activist Marc Kasky is arguing that the athletic footwear and apparel company's public relations claims about working conditions in its factories in China, Vietnam and Indonesia are false advertising under California's consumer-protection laws. Nike is responding—and has so far convinced a trial judge and an appellate court—that it merely engaged in constitutionally-protected free speech.

Despite the graphic designer's positive intentions, economic necessities drive them to contribute to a company's greenwashing.

Original photography used, which has been heavily edited:
<https://pxhere.com/en/photo/1611443>
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/photography-of-one-us-dollar-banknote-545064/>



its shareholders and the SEC? This, from a January, 1997, Enron press release announcing the new logo: "This could be one of the most memorable days at Enron since the company was created almost twelve years ago," Kenneth L. Lay, chairman and CEO of Enron, said. "We are clearly defining ourselves for all our customers. This new advertising campaign and logo will begin to inform people around the world of who Enron is, and how we can help them make decisions to improve their businesses and their lives."

It is most interesting to note that the review for the new book on Paul Rand's work, *Paul Rand, Modernist Design*, in the August, 2004, issue of this magazine featured a page with the "tilted E" Enron logo. Could there be a more potent symbol of corporate malfeasance? Yet in 1996, when the master of corporate identity designed this mark, could he have had any more knowledge of the company's future wrongdoings than did

Although one or more designers who've made their mark designing such artifacts as rock posters for grunge bands have labeled Rand a "corporate whore," they might secretly admire the man who,

according to the jacket liner of his 1993 book, *Design, Form and Chaos*, "almost single-handedly transformed commercial art from a practice that catered to the lowest common denominator of taste to one that could assert its place among the other fine arts." And who worked solo, out of his house, answered his own phone, and commanded handsome fees and respect from the chairmen of IBM, Westinghouse...and Enron. If Rand was a corporate whore, so might be all firms who specialize in corporate branding and annual reports—and just about every PR and ad agency on the globe.

What's left? More posters for grunge bands? A campaign for Birkenstocks? A brochure for the local ashram or

birthing center? In my nearly 30-year career in the business, I've found some of the least ethical clients to be nonprofit organizations and charities (but that's another story).

Design firms generally can't afford to mandate that all their clients fit a specific set of criteria, but many try their hardest to be environmentally correct. In Des Moines, for example, Steve Pattee of Pattee Design has worked long hours for low pay on projects like flash cards for the Iowa waste disposal agency that teach citizens how to recycle their trash. ■