

**BP's PR**

(Essay on Corporate Responsibility)

A few weeks ago I saw an advertisement for BP (British Petroleum, the oil company.) First, I couldn't even identify the company because the logo looked so different. I was used to their green shield, projecting strength and protectiveness. Instead here I found a Sun-like icon combined of yellow and green 'petals'. I decided to find out whether the change in design signifies change in the ir policies regarding the environment and their attitude towards renewable energy. Based on the „Sun” logo and the new tagline, „Beyond Petroleum” one would certainly think so.

My limited research provided surprising results, at least surprising for me. I believe that while BP as a company or to be more precise forces within the corporation are moving towards the right direction their new advertising campaign, emphasizing the 'green' aspects of the company's work is misleading and deceitful.

By the „right direction,” I meant that they do have programs for developing renewable energy technologies and they invest millions of dollars in this area. For me it is rather obvious that the Earth's non-renewable resources are exactly what their name suggests: non-renewable. As such they should not be used as if we would have unlimited quantities available. It is mindboggling for me that this simple logical line of thoughts has been overshadowed by other interests for decades. The highly influential Club of Rome report, published in 1972, states „If the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years” (Limits 1). Despite this warning, oil companies such as BP continue to produce and sell vast amounts of oil every day while do relatively little to develop alternative methods.

At one point employees and executives in the oil companies, including BP might have realized that if they want to stay in business they have to change from being in the business of oil to business of energy. This realization might have sparked their interest in exploring alternative ways of providing energy, not just by burning fuels. Thus it is an economic necessity for them to get into the solar-, hydro-, and wind-power business. We can be rather sure that whatever they do in this context they will do it for the profit and not for the sake of caring for the Earth or our shared environment.

The question is how important it is for them and how fast they are ready to shift fully to these renewable resources. Looking at BP, one might think that they shifted into full gear. As the New York Times wrote last month about their ads:

„In Times Square, a huge billboard went up, reading IF ONLY WE COULD HARNESS THE ENERGY OF NEW YORK CITY. Then the stranger, perhaps feeling the need to explain his intentions, went on: SOLAR, NATURAL GAS, WIND, HYDROGEN. AND OH YES, OIL. Finally, the stranger took his arm away with a bit of a shrug: IT'S A START.” (Frey)

Looking at the numbers though we get a different pictures. Alan Caruba of the National Anxiety Center claims: „The average annual \$33 million solar investment by BP equals just 0.4 percent of its \$8.5 billion 2001 petroleum expenditure. It represents 0.02 percent of its current net worth.” I assume Mr. Caruba got his numbers from Fortune magazine: „In the past six years BP has invested more than \$200 million in solar power; [...]

it invested \$8.5 billion in exploration and production of fossil fuels in 2001 alone” (Murphy). We get an even clearer sense of the relative value of the \$200 million if we compare it with “a cost of \$200 million, it began an enormous corporate rebranding exercise, shortening its name from British Petroleum to BP, coining the slogan 'Beyond Petroleum' and redesigning its corporate insignia” (Frey).

On one hand we saw that the company spends a very small percentage of its money on developing renewable resources. On the other hand, almost its entire marketing campaign consists of messages and images related to that area. This disproportion reflects that they understand that the market, the customers, are getting more and more interested in their environment and future. They want to appeal to us, while they also want to maintain their profit. This is natural thing for a business to strive for. However, I think they are misleading the consumers because their marketing campaign projects the image that BP does nothing wrong environmentally and doesn't exhaust the Earth. It is our responsibility to point out the discrepancy between their message and the true nature of business. I would love to see legislation that defines more precisely what consists of „deception and fraud” in a company's advertisements. I think this campaign would be different if more restrictive laws would be in place and enforced. But I acknowledge that the principle and laws pertaining to freedom of speech entitles them to say whatever they want to with whatever emphasis they wish to push as long as it's true.

Having said all of the above I would like to acknowledge that BP is one of the 'cleanest' oil corporation. „In 1996, BP resigned from the Global Climate Coalition [an international lobbying group set up specifically to cast skepticism on climate-change science], then offered its support of the Kyoto Protocol” (Frey). BP is also a partner in the US government's „Clean Energy Initiative” announced earlier this week. The aim of this initiative is „to provide millions of people in the developing world with access to affordable, reliable, clean, healthy, and efficient energy services” (U.S. Department of State). It remains to be seen whether the initiative will be successful in reaching its goal, but it might point to the right direction.

Perhaps the biggest change within BP can be caused by its chief executive, Lord John Browne who, based on the New York Times article seems, to be genuinely interested in limiting the harm his company is doing to the environment. But even his vision for the future is dark from an environmentalist point of view: “hydrocarbons will be the bulk of the energy supply for the next 30 to 50 years” (Frey).

“BP Solar [the company's solar-energy unit] aims to reach \$1 billion in revenue from solar-energy equipment sales by 2007; [...] the unit isn't yet profitable” (Bogoslaw). I wish the unit all the success, because until they do have more revenues, BP's green marketing campaign is not much more than an empty façade.

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