

## Beyond Propaganda

By JOHN KENNEY

Published: August 14, 2006 - NY Times opinion

FOR some men, it's cars, a sports team or watching "The Godfather" over and over. For me, it's oil companies. They fascinate me. Their size, their power, their reach. So I was particularly interested in the recent news about BP shutting down the nation's largest oil field, in Prudhoe Bay, Alaska.

I was interested in part because six years ago I helped create BP's current advertising campaign, the man-in-the-street television commercials. I can't take credit for changing the company's name from "British Petroleum" to "beyond petroleum" (lower case is cooler); my boss at the time came up with it.

That was the summer of 2000. Ideas were needed. We were pitching to the top man, Sir John Browne (now Lord Browne). My partner and I got the assignment. Other agencies got to work on Nike, Apple, Super Bowl spots. I would have taken Taco Bell. We got an oil company. At the time, I knew nothing about oil companies.

I started reading. The facts alone are amazing: 85 million barrels of oil a day used worldwide; 250,000 people born every day; climate change. I read Sir John's speeches and read about BP and its technological achievements and investment in hydrogen.

This wasn't my idea of an oil company chief. This was hope. Why didn't they talk about this stuff? And why did all big oil company advertising look alike? The typical helicopter shot of a tanker at sea, sunlight reflecting off the logo as it dissolves to a towheaded urchin on the beach, frolicking in the pristine waters. A voice like Morgan Freeman's saying, "At Gigantico Petroleum, we're on the move to keep the world on the move. And to fill this tanker with cash."

So we thought, what if you stripped away the corporate speak? What if you engaged in the debate that was happening with oil and energy and the environment?

We borrowed a video camera and approached people on the street, asking them questions: Would you rather have your car or a cleaner environment? Is global warming real? (Remember, this was 2000, when only one oil company, BP, had even admitted the possibility of global warming.) If you could say something right now to the head of a big oil company, what would you say?

It was an amazing experience. I had done man-in-the-street interviews for other products and knew that it was exceptionally difficult to get someone to stop and talk. People are simply too busy to talk seriously about, say, toilet paper with a stranger.

But with oil it was different. People stopped. They talked. They were intrigued and passionate and intelligent and a little angry. They understood that oil companies simply deliver a product. Yet — and I think this has to do with their size and profit — people often expected something more from them than they did of other large industries. A

gallon of milk costs more than a gallon of gas, but it doesn't cause global warming. And we don't need 85 million barrels of it a day.

In short, they knew the power of an oil company executive. And they wanted leaders.

After a day and a half of interviews, we had enough footage for five commercials. They were raw and emotional. The things people said were sometimes none-too-flattering to BP or the industry. At the end of each spot, we put up a list of what BP was doing in terms of cleaner fuels, alternative forms of energy, recognizing global warming and reducing their own emissions; stuff you didn't hear from an oil company. Before the "beyond petroleum" tagline, we added, "It's a start."

We did print ads too. The same way. Real people, real quotes as headlines that challenged BP and the industry. No oil company — few companies at all — had ever spoken like this, confronting the debate so frankly.

They liked it.

Advertising is a funny business. You get to help shape the personalities of huge companies. Most often it's for cellphone service or credit cards or fast food or paper towels. Rarely are you faced with whether you "believe" in a product or service. This was different. This was serious. I believed wholeheartedly in BP's message, that we could go — or at least work toward going — beyond petroleum.

The campaign first appeared a few days before Sept. 11, 2001. It was shelved for a long time. Then relaunched. In that time, I moved on to other assignments and later another agency.

The campaign is running again. I heard that the interviewees are prescreened now, which is too bad. And last week, I heard that the pipeline in Prudhoe Bay is corroded and leaking. The company that claims to be beyond petroleum shut down a pipeline that serves up 400,000 barrels of petroleum a day. Maybe Coca-Cola's new line should be "It's good for your teeth."

I read too that the energy expert Daniel Yergin claimed last week that "new analysis of oil-industry activity points to a considerable growth in the capacity to produce oil in the years ahead." It seems unlikely that anyone's going to push hard to change our energy future.

I guess, looking at it now, "beyond petroleum" is just advertising. It's become mere marketing — perhaps it always was — instead of a genuine attempt to engage the public in the debate or a corporate rallying cry to change the paradigm. Maybe I'm naïve.

It's just that I believe that the handful of men who run these remarkable companies possess something more valuable than wealth, privilege and power. They have at their disposal the truly rare possibility of creating a legacy, the ability to change things, on a huge scale.

I never actually met Lord Browne. He announced recently that he'll retire at the end of 2008, when he reaches BP's mandatory retirement age of 60. I have no doubt he is a good, decent and exceptionally bright person. But imagine what the headlines could have read: "Lord Browne to retire; changed oil industry and the world."

Think of it. Going beyond petroleum. The best and brightest, at a company that can provide practically unlimited resources, trying to find newer, smarter, cleaner ways of powering the world. Only they didn't go beyond petroleum. They are petroleum.

The problem there is that "are petroleum" just isn't a great tagline.

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