

Inside the minds of corporate pranksters

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Will the real Chevron please stand up?

When Chevron Corp. rolled out its multimillion-dollar "green" advertising campaign to address negative images of itself last fall, the oil giant hit on a fresh, self-effacing theme: "We Agree."

But for most of a day, it looked like the oil giant was contritely admitting, "Oil Companies Should Clean Up Their Messes." One of the key ads pictured an elderly, wizened indigenous man presumably from one of the Third World countries where the company has conducted its operations, with a red-stamped stencil "We Agree," signed by top Chevron executives.

"For decades, oil companies like ours have worked in disadvantaged areas, influencing policy in order to do there what we can't do at home. It's time this changed," read the small print.

Could the ads and website – with Chevron's logo emblazoned on it – really be Chevron speaking?

No, it turned out that the oil giant had been punk'd.



[Patrick Herms / theyesmen.org](#)

The 2009 protest above was one of many organized by the Yes Men in San Francisco to draw attention to executives from Chevron and other major corporations. The group targets corporations it sees as sources of pollution, making them a nightmare for corporate public relations officials.

California's biggest corporation probably didn't count on being upstaged by a few upstart activist groups eight hours before its big PR campaign launch. However, a campaign orchestrated behind the scenes by the Yes Men, notorious anti-corporate pranksters, looking very much like Chevron's own, was a hoax.

The fake campaign "aimed at showing Chevron as a 'real people' corporation," complete with the street-art, wheat-pasted poster aesthetic Chevron was going for, was actually created by the Yes Men, using a spoofed website <http://www.chevron-weagree.com/> that was a dead-ringer for www.chevron.com/weagree. The fake press release was so convincing that several news outlets took the bait, until, after some confusion, the real story emerged.



The Yes Men

Yes Men Andy Bichlbaum, left, one of several stage names for Jacques Servin, and Mike Bonanno, right, an alias used by Igor Vamos, have been satirizing corporations for years.



One of their most famous hoaxes was a parody of a Chevron ad in which the oil giant was depicted as admitting that it engaged in polluting activities in poor nations that wouldn't have been allowed in the United States.

In the authentic Chevron press release last October, Rhonda Zygocki, vice president of policy, government and public affairs at Chevron, said: "We hear what people say about oil companies – that they should develop renewables, support communities, create jobs and protect the environment – and the fact is, we agree."

But the hoax, says Ginger Cassady of Rainforest Action Network – one of two California nonprofits that sought out the pastiche artists – effectively stole the thunder of Chevron's real campaign, estimated to cost \$60 million: "Almost every single story talked about the hoax, highlighting Chevron's real impact on the ground."

To rectify the situation, Chevron had to tell the news media it had nothing to do with the parody campaign portraying what the pranksters called "real people on the receiving end of Chevron controversies in Ecuador, Nigeria, the U.S. Gulf Coast and elsewhere" and "admitting to abuses that companies usually try to hide."

Marshall McLuhan, author of the line, "the medium is the message" would be chuckling in his grave. But not everyone is laughing. Along the way, these merry pranksters have made enemies.

Duo stage satire on shoestring

When the Yes Men staged a press conference several years ago, posing as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, claiming the powerful body had reversed its position to support legislation favoring climate protection, the Chamber sued. And the National Press Club, which hosted their press conference, is still fuming about the stunt.

"It's a waste of reporters' time to stage phony news conferences," says Bill McCarren, manager of the National Press Club. "It's childish."

Cult heroes to some, clownish disrupters of the established order to others, the Yes Men have for more than a decade perfected the art of masquerading as corporate "flacks." They've posed as everything from high-powered executives of ExxonMobil and the U.S. National Petroleum Council, to spokespeople from Dow Chemical and the World Trade Organization. They do it on a shoestring – using thrift-shop business suits and inexpensive corporate calling cards.

These swashbuckling satirists got their start in 1999 when they created a parody website for the World Trade Organization to lampoon what they saw as the injustices of globalization. To their great surprise, they were mistaken for the real WTO and invited as panelists to the international conference, says one of the two Yes Men, Andy Bichlbaum.

Bichlbaum, along with Mike Bonanno, makes up the duo. Bichlbaum is one of several guerrilla-theater stage names for Jacques Servin, a college teacher in New York and specialist in the art of "culture jamming," an agitprop tactic of groups satirizing mainstream corporate mass media and advertising. Bonanno is an alias for Igor Vamos, a professor of media arts.

Since then, the duo have been springing pranks, fulfilling their website's stated mission of "impersonating big-time criminals in order to publicly humiliate them."

- In May, working with a group calling itself Coal is Killing Kids, the Yes Men helped unveil a spoof website, coalcares.com, claiming to be Peabody Energy, the world's largest private coal company. A parody campaign offered kid-friendly asthma inhalers decorated with mock custom images, such as Justin Bieber and Dora the Explorer, and coupons for medication to kids living within 200 miles of a coal plant.
- In April, they collaborated with US Uncut, a group taking aim at corporate tax-cheaters, issuing a press release that made it sound as though General Electric had decided to do the right thing and give the government back its \$3.2 billion tax refund from the year before.
- In one of their more infamous pranks, Bichlbaum, posing as a Dow Chemical spokesperson, got on a BBC-TV news program in 2004 with some 300 million viewers and announced that Dow would finally be cleaning up the site of the largest industrial accident in world history, the Bhopal catastrophe.

Invisible pollution targeted

Much of their work targets what they see as invisible scourges of corporate pollution. "Chevron should clean up its messes in Ecuador," Bichlbaum said. "They left billions of gallons of toxic waste in the jungle in Ecuador, and many have gotten sick. Chevron has been judged liable there and refusing to pay and accept that."

Chevron, on the other hand, saw the spoof-website stunt as an affront to their genuine efforts to reach out to the public. Morgan Crinklaw, media relations adviser for Chevron, said, "Unfortunately, there are some that are not interested in engaging in a constructive dialogue, and instead resort to tired rhetoric and predictable stunts."

Guerrilla theater has a venerable history among political activists. It's fun, and it grabs attention. Josh Golin, an activist with the Campaign for a Commercial Free Childhood, viewed the Peabody spoof as a brilliant tactic for reaching the general public.

"Their creativity is inspiring to the rest of us who work in traditional ways to influence policy," says Golin.

He credits the coincidental timing of the coal parody website with helping get the children's books publishers, Scholastic Inc., to sever ties with the coal industry.

A spokesperson for the Natural Resources Defense Council, too, sees the value of their ability to "cut through the noise" of complex policy debates and allow the public to see corporations in action.

Carl Pope, chair of the Sierra Club's board of directors, speaking personally, says, "We can point to all the studies we want, on the links between asthma and coal pollution, and they don't have to

respond, and don't," he says. "But when the Yes Men speak in their name to confirm that reality, they then, of course, must rebut."

Antonia Juhasz of Global Exchange, a San Francisco-based nonprofit critical of globalization and author of "The Tyranny of Oil," says the Chevron prank spurred a protest on the streets of San Francisco that brought out hundreds of people last fall.

"We are facing a time when wealth and power is more concentrated in corporate hands, with little oversight by our political institutions, and an ever-growing litany of disastrous outcomes of their operations," she says, "and we need every tool available to challenge that concentration of power and wealth."

Corporations mishandle response

Using culture jamming tools like impersonation and spoofed brands and product images, the Yes Men try to expose the underside of corporate culture.

Posing as Exxon company representatives at a petroleum industry conference, for example, the duo unveiled their invention of a biofuel dubbed Exxon Vivoleum, derived from dead humans – the humans that would be left behind in a globally scorched planet afflicted by a runaway greenhouse effect – turned into candles in cute little human shapes. They were shocked to find that few attendees even got the joke.

Some even took seriously their disaster-ready, inflatable, zip-up flotation suits called "SurvivaBalls" – designed to "handle anything Mother Nature throws at you!" – supposedly issued by Halliburton. These antics are chronicled in two documentaries they've made, the latest "The Yes Men Fix The World."

The corporations aren't happy to be parodied and then make things worse for themselves when they step in, says Eric Frankowski, associate director for Resource Media, a communications firm, as when Dow Chemical loudly distanced itself from a humane gesture like compensating the victims of the tragic accident at Bhopal, still suffering 20 years later.

Similarly, when Peabody Energy threatened to bring suit, sending Coal is Killing Kids a typical lawyerly letter, it "really just played into their hands," says Frankowski. Peabody went on to misquote another environmental group, World Resources Institute, which asked the company to retract their statements. "In order to defend itself, the company had to completely distort the facts," he says, and then were punk'd a second time having to retract their factual distortion.

Andrew Baum, lawyer for Foley & Lardner, representing Peabody, charges that the Yes Men are guilty of "identity theft." However, Electronic Frontier Foundation lawyers representing the Yes Men insist they're protected by constitutionally guaranteed free speech. Corynne McSherry, EFF attorney, laughs at the charge of identity theft, which is a crime committed by thieves stealing credit cards. "No," she says, "this is the latest 21st century version of a time-honored form of political speech called satire."

Policy advocates question impact

With assumed identities, they've been able to pull off some amazing high jinks, becoming corporate PR officials' worst nightmare. No thanks to them, Chevron's "We Agree" campaign was named as one of the top 10 "biggest branding and marketing fiascoes of 2010" by Ad Age.

But Yes Men's antics aren't as popular among some policy types. "It sounds as if they are having fun," says Frank O'Donnell of Clean Air Watch, who found the Peabody spoof especially amusing. "I like satire more than most people. But it's hard to identify any policy changes these activists have forged – so far."

Some who've been burned see hoaxstering as a foolish press strategy. "I don't see their tactics – trying to dupe reporters – as acceptable to anyone trying to achieve something meaningful in the world," says the National Press Club's McCarren.

The Yes Men don't see the press as their target, just hack journalism. It's easy to fool reporters who don't verify their sources or dig very deep, says Bichlbaum. His real mission, he says, is giving writers hooks for real, deeper investigations: "Our goal is to use trickery to get at broader truths."

Instead of unveiling the supposed truth, "We present something that's patently false and over-the-top to make people ask for the real story," says Bichlbaum. By punking corporate yes-people, these pranksters hope to encourage reporters – and their readers, listeners, and viewers – to begin to differentiate news from schmooze and pay attention to who may be punking them.

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