

Should Chevron Be Held Accountable For Greenwashing? Chevron Should.

Kaavya Baliga

The 1980s was a time of incredible feats in the fight against environmental degradation. With the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and Earth Day in the early 70s, environmentalists' voices started to be heard by the American public. However, the 80s also came with many environmental setbacks: holes were found in the ozone layer like never before, the Exxon Valdez oil spill lined the coast of Alaska, and "greenwashing," or using environmentalism for their benefit, became the norm for Big Oil. Like the rest of the oil companies, Chevron released a greenwashing campaign titled "People Do," sharing their environmental feats without acknowledging their own carbon footprint. Following the campaign, Chevron found success in sales and company trust: their marketing ploy had worked. Chevron's "People Do" ad campaign spearheaded the greenwashing of the oil industry, and in doing so, negatively impacted the trajectory of the environmentalist movement; not only were they two-faced in their advertising in classic greenwashing fashion, but they encouraged other companies to use environmentalism for financial benefit and exacerbated political division within the movement.

The people of America were hesitant to agree that Chevron was wrong in its two-faced advertising. Grid Toland is just one of many Big Oil enthusiasts that believed that the greenwashing of Chevron's "People Do" ad campaign was justified.¹ In the case of the El Segundo butterfly, Chevron did indeed make a positive impact on the environment; in their oil refinery located in El Segundo, California, Chevron was able to maintain a small population of the endangered butterflies by landscaping and planting buckwheat for them.² This case was the focus of one of the advertisements in their campaign, describing the species as "not much bigger than your fingernail, yet people who work there protect the area and plant buckwheat."³ Chevron painted themselves as an environmentalist corporation by emphasizing the small size of the butterfly in comparison to the lengths they go to protect them. According to Grid Toland, president of community affairs at Chevron, "We're not perfect, but we're trying [...]. The fact that we've been involved in a lawsuit with the EPA doesn't take away from the positive news."⁴ Unsurprisingly, Chevron had been dumping illegal amounts of wastewater and oil into the same reserve despite their efforts to save the El Segundo Butterfly. Chevron was sued by the EPA in an 18-month back-and-forth lawsuit, and none of it was advertised.⁵ Chevron may have advertised themselves as an honest, imperfect-but-trying company, but this has proven to be a large understatement. In fact, Chevron's "People Do" ad campaign was a trendsetter of greenwashing, and further normalized a lack of transparency in the oil industry and beyond. Vice President of Enviroquest Dan Cole explains that because of the incline in the use of greenwashing, "it will

¹ Chevron, "People Do," Television advertisement, Aired 1985, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpm00Z9PXzk>.

² Connie Benesch, "Chevron Does Do's and Don'ts," *Los Angeles Times (1923-1995)* (Los Angeles, Calif.), 1988, 1. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/chevron-does-dos-donts/docview/901618010/se-2?accountid=40848>.

³ Chevron, "People Do," Television advertisement, Aired 1985, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpm00Z9PXzk>.

⁴ Benesch, 1.

<https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/chevron-does-dos-donts/docview/901618010/se-2?accountid=40848>.

⁵ Ibid.

become increasingly difficult for the consumer to sort out who is being sincere.”⁶ Cole elucidates how this campaign had a ripple effect on the environmentalist movement as a whole, as this increased difficulty means that even skeptical consumers could fall for greenwashing. According to the creators and promoters of Earth Day, many Big Oil companies contacted them to be sponsored for promotional events in 1990.⁷ As shown, Chevron’s greenwashing throughout the 80s encouraged companies to be two-faced in their marketing and in doing so made a long-term impact on the environmentalist movement.

Chevron’s advertisement campaign negatively affected the environmentalist movement by encouraging other companies to use environmentalism for financial benefit. Chevron’s expenditures for the El Segundo Butterfly are telling of their motives: while they spent \$5,000 on the research and development of the refinery, they spent about \$200,000 on the project’s advertising.⁸ Not only did the company have enough money to be allocated to additional, more systemic efforts to clean the planet, and yet they didn’t, the company prioritized money for advertising. In another advertisement in their “People Do” commercial series, they explained their dedication to protecting the grizzly bears native to their land, and proceed to ask and answer the question: “Do people sometimes work through the winter, so nature can have spring all to herself? People do.”⁹ The question they asked implied that it was of their own volition to “work through the winter,” and emphasized the effort they put in to do so; however, these actions are mandatory California state law.¹⁰ Their priority here was to advertise their company as an environmentalist one and persuade their more skeptical customers to buy in; money, not climate change, was their motivation. Despite clear signs that this company was greenwashing, statistics showed that their sales increased by ten percent, and American citizens tended to trust Chevron over other oil companies.¹¹ Seeing this success, many oil companies followed Chevron’s greenwashing tactics: like Arco. According to Ken Dickerson, senior vice president of government affairs at Arco, “It wasn’t so much a case of Arco suddenly becoming green [...] [W]e decided if we want to stay in business, we’d better help solve some of the problems.”¹² Dickerson’s words illuminate the impact of Chevron’s campaign on the environmentalist movement, in that companies felt the need to push an environmentalist agenda not even to grow economically, but purely to stay in business. Although these companies were exposed for their greenwashing, greenwashing within Big Oil and beyond has continued to this day. Currently, these companies are no longer against the idea of climate change but are against the idea of making systemic changes that will hinder their own economic growth. So, they changed their advertising.

Lastly, Chevron’s “People Do” campaign exacerbated political division within the environmentalist movement. First, Chevron targeted political demographics by location in many

⁶ Bruce Horovitz, “Firm Exercises Its Social Consciousness,” *Los Angeles Times* (1923-1995) (Los Angeles, Calif.), 1989, 2.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Justin Lowe and Hillary Hansen, “A Look behind the Advertising: The Journal Investigates Chevron’s Eco-Ad Campaign,” *Earth Island Journal* 5, no. 1 (1990): 26-27.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/43882164>.

⁹ Chevron, “People Do,” Television advertisement, Aired 1980, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bReBO55XzZc>.

¹⁰ Horovitz

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Horovitz

ways: they chose to air their ads in California, Texas, and Louisiana, which happen to be their top oil-producing states (and likely the states where their impact would be seen the most).¹³ Furthermore, Chevron focused on these states in their advertisements, with their commercials about the El Segundo butterfly or the California desert kit fox.¹⁴ Because of this, a divide within a previously politically inclusive environmentalist movement formed between the liberals who saw through the marketing ploys of Big Oil, and the conservatives, unwilling to sacrifice economic growth for the environment. This expanded further than Chevron to companies like Exxon, who also made discoveries about and assessed the climate situation extensively, but concluded that the effect of humans on the climate is undetermined. According to one report from 1996, which was after considerable research, Exxon concluded that “huge economic consequences and scientific uncertainty (of climate change efforts) have not prevented activists from politicizing the issue and trying to stir up unreasonable fears.”¹⁵ Ironically, Exxon complained about the politicizing of climate change that they took part in; Exxon prioritized the pleasing of their conservative stakeholders over the objective facts around climate change and exacerbated the political divide over climate change that came to fruition in the 80s. Not only did these companies have the intention of shifting the political views around their company, but Big Oil did indeed have an impact on the political climate. Currently, 67% of Republicans don’t believe oil companies should be held accountable for climate change, despite 63% of them believing that they caused it in some way.¹⁶ Companies and consumers alike can agree that climate change exists, but cannot agree on how to fight against it. Political division is a large contributor to what is exacerbating climate change.

In 2021, Chevron released a series of black-and-white ads, marketing itself as the “human energy company.” In one advertisement, they revisit the El Segundo Refinery they did in their “People Do” ad campaign, stating that they are “looking to turn plant-based oil into renewable gasoline, jet, and diesel fuels” at the El Segundo Refinery.¹⁷ Looking at the rhetoric throughout Chevron’s “People Do” ad campaign, it seems shocking for Chevron to finally turn to green technology; but this is not shocking. Exemplified by Exxon’s climate paper “Global Warming: Who’s Right?” companies have long known that they are affecting the environment. They also know that as people see the tangible effects of climate change, the Overton window will shift left, towards stronger efforts against climate change. However, to maximize their profit and leech what they can out of both Big Oil and green technology, they can use their advertising to convince people of their environmental dedication. Chevron continues to put out two-faced advertising for financial and social gain. Greenwashing as a whole will continue to have an impact on the environment as long as consumers prioritize consuming and companies prioritize earning. It’s up to us to bridge the demographic gaps exacerbated by the environmental setbacks of the 80s and fight for our lives and for the planet.

¹³ Joshua Karliner, *The Corporate Planet: Ecology and Politics in the Age of Globalization*, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1997, https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Corporate_Planet/2CHLmPx2PJ0C?hl=en&gbpv=1

¹⁴ Chevron, “People Do,” Television advertisement, Aired 1985, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpm00Z9PXzk>; Chevron, “People Do,” Television advertisement, Aired 1988, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0njymB06JB8>.

¹⁵ Lee Raymond, “Global Warming: Who’s Right?” 1996. <https://www.climatefiles.com/exxonmobil/global-warming-who-is-right-1996/>.

¹⁶ Alvin Chang and Andrew Witherspoon, “Most Republicans believe oil and gas companies are somewhat responsible for climate change,” Infographic, The Guardian, October 26, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/oct/26/republicans-climate-crisis-big-oil-poll>.

¹⁷ “power | chevron,” Television advertisement, Aired 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fb6gGxwRE-U>.

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