



## Chevron Ad Spoofs: A Brand Blunder?

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Chevron, you just got punked. On Oct. 18, the San Ramon, Calif.-based oil giant launched an ad campaign designed to spotlight its efforts in developing renewable energy and investing profits into job growth, community development and supporting small business. However, just before the campaign launched, fake ads and a fake website mimicking the campaign beat it to the punch.

The fake ads, which are designed to draw attention to Chevron's alleged role in oil pollution in the Amazon rainforest in Ecuador, were the work of the Rainforest Action Network, an environmental organization that runs the site ChangeChevron.org, and The Yes Men, a group of pranksters that, according to its website, "work[s] to expose corporate crimes, mainly through humor."

The real spots include phrases like, "Oil Companies Should Support Small Business" and "Oil Companies Should Support the Communities They're a Part Of," with the response, "We Agree." The fake ads followed the "We Agree" theme but included lines like "Oil Companies Should Fix the Problems They Create" and "Oil Companies Should Clean Up Their Messes." The website FunnyOrDie.com ran a video parody of the Chevron commercials, and the Yes Men and Rainforest Action Network created a website, ChevronThinksWe'reStupid.org, with a contest to spoof the ads.

"This is a very predictable stunt," says Chevron spokesman Morgan Crinklaw. "We knew the activist groups would do something like this because their sole focus is to attack Chevron rather than engage in a constructive dialogue."

But what do fake ads mean for a campaign's or brand's overall effectiveness? The fake Chevron ads generated public awareness for the campaign via press coverage from *Advertising Age*, *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. Spoofs sometimes can elevate a brand or a campaign in a positive way, such as the countless video parodies of MasterCard Worldwide's "Priceless" campaign. But in the case of the Chevron spoofs, which highlighted environmental problems allegedly brought about by Chevron, some branding experts say that not all press is good press.

"When the spoof is hooking onto universal insight, it can be great for a brand," says Stef Gans, CEO of Effective Brands, a marketing consultancy in New York. However, he says, "Chevron ... comes across as extremely fake. From the minute their new campaign went live, they [were on] defense and they are, rightfully so, being put under pressure for [not] being genuine."

Gans says the problem with the Chevron campaign is that they weren't able to clearly communicate their purpose. "If a brand is unclear about its purpose and/or not able to communicate it clearly, in today's global market it is increasingly difficult to survive as a brand and differentiate yourself from others, and have a distinctive place in people's minds. This is a hot-air campaign that has no reason for being."

Yet Chevron's Crinklaw says that the company has no plans to abandon the campaign in light of the spoofs. "We're continuing to promote the messages of our campaign, which is about having a constructive dialogue and finding a common ground and moving forward," he says. "We have gotten an overwhelmingly positive response to our ad campaign because of the direct tone that it takes and how it's addressing real issues."