

Purpose: to clarify some otherwise confusing issues.
“...in multitude of counselors there is safety.”

KFC®, BP®, and Political Correctness

Written by Mick Abraham

Remember Kentucky Fried Chicken®?

Signs and advertisements promoting “Kentucky Fried Chicken” were once commonplace in America, but no more; the company brand was changed to “KFC” in 1991. A corporate name change on this scale is a multimillion dollar project. Such an expense would be incurred only after careful research involving consumer psychology, focus groups, etc. In this case, the name change was able to reduce the company’s association with fried foods in the minds of consumers. This was a carefully conceived strategy, because many people had become concerned that fried foods represent a health hazard.

Of course, the company probably sells more fried chicken than anything else, for one simple reason: people want to buy it and eat it. By taking the fat out of the signage and advertising, the company removed a psychological barrier. Consumers who suffer from “fat-guilt” somehow feel less compelled to avoid these restaurants. By leaving fried chicken on the menu, however, the company can still sell what the consumers really want.

I’m not a nutritionist, and I’m not promoting any theory on diet and health. If party A wants to sell fried chicken and party B wants to buy it, that’s fine with me. However, KFC serves as an interesting object lesson in market behavior. **Words were adjusted in order to change public perception of a reality that is essentially unchanged.** That Original Recipe® fried chicken is just the same, regardless of what the sign outside says. However, just changing the corporate image seemed to have enough positive effect on consumer psychology to justify the cost.

Remember British Petroleum®?

In similar fashion, “British Petroleum” is a brand name that we hear very little of these days. The company spent hundreds of millions of dollars to reinvent its corporate identity, beginning in the year 2000. The old “BP” stood for “British Petroleum”. The imagemakers would have us believe that the new “bp” stands for “beyond petroleum”. This is a classic example of corporate “greenwashing”, complete with a new logo which looks like a hybrid between a sunburst and a flower.

A recent BP ad campaign features this tagline: “Solar, natural gas, hydrogen, wind. And oh yes, oil.” This implies that oil is just a sideline to the company’s more substantial clean energy efforts—a very questionable implication. Fortune magazine described this as **“a novel advertising strategy: pitch your least important product and ignore your most important one.”**

Full Disclosure, Please

BP is certainly a “big fish” within the small photovoltaic “pond”. BP Solar modules compare favorably with other top brands. BP is also working on wind power and cleaner burning fuels. However, when compared to the big picture, the “green energy” efforts at BP seem far too insignificant to justify a complete corporate rebranding.

BP manufactures over 70 million watts of solar electric modules per year. This seems huge, but a watt is a relatively tiny unit of power—even when multiplied out over the long lifetime of a solar module. When compared against the billions of cubic feet of natural gas and millions of barrels of oil that the company delivers **each day**, BP’s solar activities are on a scale resembling that of a single casino sign burning among all the lights of Las Vegas.

The Reality

BP mainly sells fossil fuels, for one simple reason: people want to buy these fuels and burn them. If party A wants to buy petroleum and party BP wants to sell it to them, that’s really none of my business, is it? My only

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criticism is focused on the deception (and self deception) that may be occurring. BP is over 99% fossil fuel based, regardless of what its marketing department says.

The world is not “beyond petroleum”—we’re not even close. We won’t go beyond petroleum unless (a) something better comes along, or (b) we burn up all the fossil fuels. This reality cannot be changed by semantics. Consumers should be on the lookout for marketing and public relations efforts that try to distort reality.

Closer to Home...

Regrettably, this same type of distortion has permeated my industry, particularly among those who maintain that “off grid” electricity is better than electricity purchased from the public power system. “Getting off the grid” has been overhyped and overromanticized—usually by those who benefit financially from such hype. The benefits of battery based systems have been exaggerated, and the drawbacks have been downplayed.



It is understandable that people in business are inclined to vigorously promote their industry. When the business has a politically correct component, the promoters may be ideologically predisposed to slant the sales pitch even further. However, no amount of zeal on the part of the “evangelist” can justify the distortions which have occurred. A great many consumers have been misled into unrealistic expectations for solar/off grid technology.

Myths and Facts

Myth: “With solar electricity, you never have a power blackout. Off-grid solar is more trouble-free than grid power.” **Fact:** Solar electricity stops working at least every night—a fact that’s good for battery companies. *When added to grid power*, battery based systems can increase power reliability. However, off grid battery systems are often less reliable than American public power—mainly because of battery and generator problems. **Myth:** “If your power bill is too high, you’ll save money by pulling the plug and getting off the grid.” **Fact:** Battery amortization costs alone often exceed the cost of equivalent power purchased from an American utility.

A well known solar entrepreneur has described his new home as follows: “**My wife and I found our perfect home in the woods, except for one thing—it already had electricity from the grid.**” We might expect this man to disconnect the “nearly perfect home” from public power, and install a battery based off grid system. However, he chose to stay on the grid, and installed a small “token solar” system instead. What’s wrong with this picture?

I think it’s OK for a solar merchant to buy power from the public utility; I do this myself. However, an ethical question arises if that same merchant implies that grid power is inferior to off-grid power.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Don’t get me wrong. When applied appropriately, I really like the products I sell. However, when contemplated for inappropriate applications or with unrealistic expectations, solar energy professionals should strive to furnish reality checks, even if it costs them a sale. Prospective end users are encouraged to develop and maintain relationships with genuine energy experts, to heed sound advice, and to be wary of overzealous “solar evangelists”.

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