

BP's Reality

Three years ago, on the cover of our July issue—always our “brand identity” issue—we featured BP. We would laugh about the irony if the reality weren't so tragic.

An oil company bent on projecting a “green” image certainly made for a good story at the time. It's hard to resist the allure of such a narrative when success might make a real difference in the world.

A culture that cares is a cause worth considering.

Clearly that will never happen when the storyline is just a tactical cause-marketing come-on that nobody believes is for real. For a brand to re-badge itself as completely as BP apparently had once hoped requires a profound cultural shift that evidently never happened there.

For me, the memorable thing about our BP story was the way Ann Hand, then its marketing chief, framed it. Ann clearly was proud of Helios House, which was BP's “sustainable” gas station. But her main focus was less on “green marketing” than on creating a better customer experience.

“It just felt like it was a worthy cause to try to get after the guest experience rather than just accepting the self-fulfilling prophecy that buying gas is a bad customer experience,” she said.

Had BP succeeded in this modest goal, it wouldn't have prevented the oil spill. But we can still give Ann Hand credit for recognizing that improving a brand's identity can be as simple as making something as mundane as filling your gas tank more pleasant. That doesn't help the planet right now, but it's a cause worth considering.



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