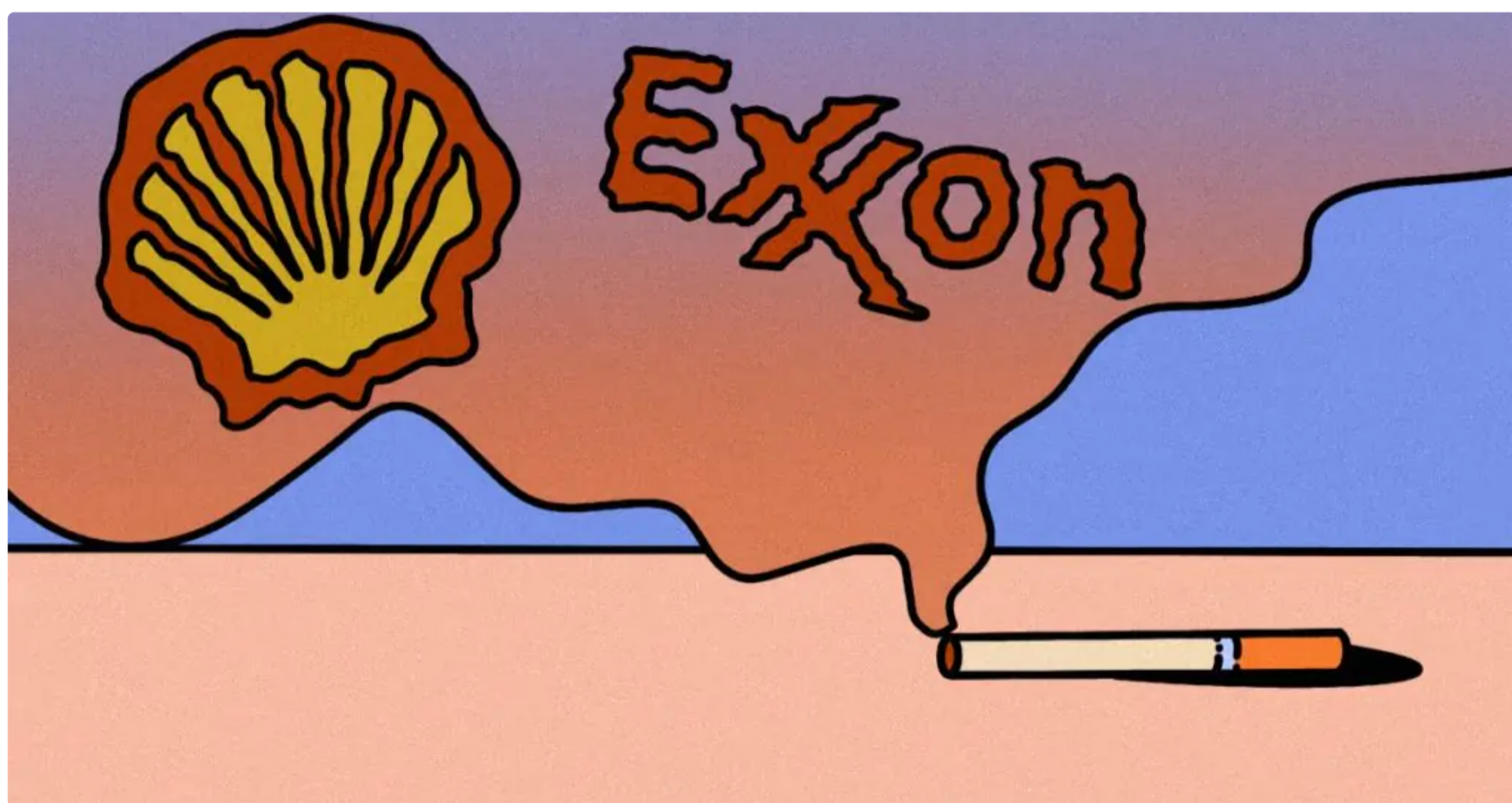


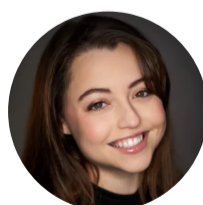
Sustainability

Turning Agencies Against Fossil Fuel Brands Harkens Back to the Tobacco Wars

But activists and climate-focused marketers say the ad world is a long way from breaking with Big Oil



Activists want to create the same taboo around fossil fuels in advertising that exists for tobacco. Kacy Burdette



By Kathryn Lundstrom & Emmy Liederman

OCTOBER 25, 2021

When Lucy Glaser was interviewing for an early-career position at a well-known ad agency in Chicago in the mid-2010s, one of the first questions the interviewer asked her was this: "Would you consider working on a tobacco account?"

Glaser refers to that moment as the first “human crisis” of her career. The ad world can be hard to break into, and she was so close to landing the gig. Still, she did not want to lend her talents to an industry that was knowingly causing harm.

Glaser told the interviewer no. And despite her fears that it might affect her candidacy, she got the job. The agency put her on a different account.

But that kind of flexibility around tobacco only exists thanks to a decades-long fight to turn the ad world against an industry that had previously served as the lifeblood of many agencies. And now, as climate change is threatening livelihoods around the world, activists want to change agencies’ attitudes toward the industry that’s causing the greatest harm to the planet—fossil fuels, which are responsible for 74% of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions.



The Marlboro Man, created by Leo Burnett in 1954, turned the cigarette brand into an American favorite. Gilles Mingasson/Getty Images

Phillip Morris and the Marlboro Man, once epitomes of all-American coolness, were the darlings of the ad industry for decades. A concerted anti-smoking movement, scores of research linking cigarette smoke to cancer and heart disease and increased regulation flipped tobacco’s reputation on its head between the mid-1980s and mid-2000s, molding it into an industry laden with taboo.



And while the tobacco-fossil fuel analogy isn’t a perfect one, it does offer insight into how climate activists are approaching the issue of fossil fuel advertising, and what it might take for the industry to turn its back on Big Oil. Experts note that the fight against Big Tobacco was multipronged, and that agencies only moved away from it when there was no other choice—regulatory action and public opinion had shifted, and taking a stand against tobacco became an ethical imperative. But as the world’s largest agencies ignore calls to align their client rosters with their sustainability goals, it’s clear that the ad world is far from ready to cut ties with Big Oil. Even so, the rumblings of a coming moral reckoning can be felt in the next generation’s climate convictions.

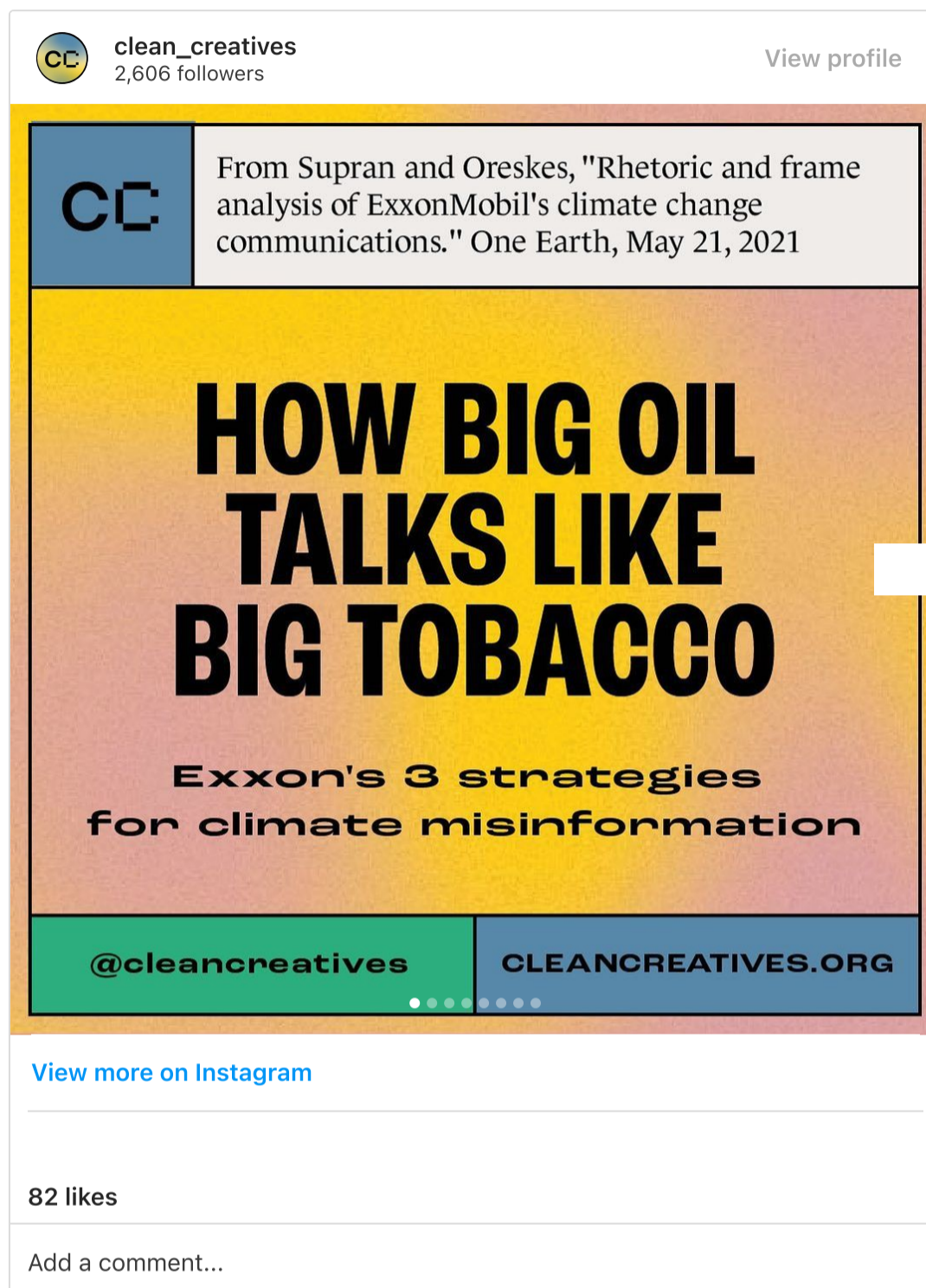


THIS GROUP WANTS AGENCIES TO STOP WORKING WITH FOSSIL FUEL CLIENTS

Kicking the ad world’s fossil fuel habit

Clean Creatives, an advocacy group funded by Fossil Free Media, aims to bring the same notoriety and negative connotation to the fossil fuel industry that the anti-smoking movement fought for against Big Tobacco.

Last month, Clean Creatives published a report listing 90 ad and PR agencies it claims have held contracts with fossil fuel companies since 2008. The report explicitly connects this fight to the tobacco wars of the 1980s and 1990s—something that strikes a strong chord with anyone who was in or around the ad industry during that time.



Agencies "didn't just ban smoking in their offices, they stopped working with Philip Morris," Duncan Meisel, campaign director for Clean Creatives, told Adweek. "The same needs to be here in terms of climate. We understand how bad this problem is; we understand that fossil fuels are causing it." The next step, he said, is for ad agencies to stop working with companies that extract fossil fuels.



But the tobacco-fossil fuel analogy isn't a perfect one. Cigarettes are a product that marketers for decades painted as an American staple, embodying freedom and social capital and success. As an issue, it's still a matter that impacts individual consumption, as opposed to a point portending existential global destruction.



**Lady
with a Lamp**
(1946 Version)

• The pages of medical history during the last century glow with the names of great women. Florence Nightingale, the “lady with the lamp”... Elizabeth Blackwell, first American woman to be given the proud degree M.D.... Drs. Mary Putnam Jacobi... Jane Viola Meyers... Anna Broomall... the list is long. And brilliant. In America today, thanks to the intrepid spirit of these pioneers, 7,250 women doctors carry the lamps they lighted ever further along the path of human service.

According to a recent Nationwide survey:

MORE DOCTORS SMOKE CAMELS THAN ANY OTHER CIGARETTE

• Men and women in every branch of medicine—113,597 in all—were queried in this nationwide study of cigarette preference. Three leading research organizations made the survey. The gist of the query was—What cigarette do you smoke, Doctor?
The brand named most was Camel!
The rich, full flavor and cool mildness of Camel’s superb blend of costlier tobaccos seem to have won the same favor in medical circles as with millions of smokers the world around. If you are a Camel smoker, this preference among doctors will hardly surprise you. If you’re not—well, try Camels now.



TRY CAMELS ON YOUR “T-ZONE”



That’s T for Taste and T for Throat...the most critical “laboratory” for any cigarette. See how your taste responds to the rich, full flavor of Camel’s costlier tobaccos. See how your throat reacts to Camel’s cool mildness. On the basis of the experience of many millions of smokers, we believe Camels will suit your “T-Zone” to a “T.”

CAMELS *Costlier Tobaccos*

R. J. REYNOLDS TOBACCO CO. WIRETAC SYSTEM, R. C.

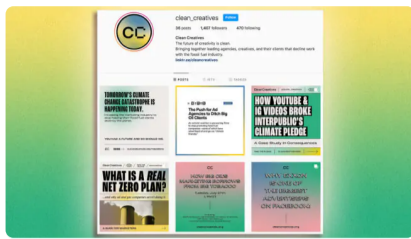


Long before Joe Camel hit the scene, the R.J. Reynolds brand marketed itself as the medical industry’s favorite cigarette. Apic/Getty Images

The comparison between tobacco and one of the primary sources of climate change falls apart in the face of the ubiquity of fossil fuels in everyone’s lives. Coal, oil, natural gas and other nonrenewable energy sources heat our homes, light our lamps and power manufacturing facilities. We’re at least five years away from electric vehicles replacing gas-guzzlers. Fossil fuel brands are ingrained into the fabric of modern life in essential ways that tobacco was not.

Still, changing their reputation is a crucial first step to ending that reliance.

"We're nowhere near the time where ExxonMobil and Chevron and BP and Shell lose their social license," Jeff Nesbit, executive director at strategic communications firm Climate Nexus. And that has a lot to do with the power of those companies' brands. "They're spending hundreds of millions of dollars on proactive positive framing [and] advertising to position themselves as companies of innovation ... creating products that Americans and the world loves."



YOUNG MARKETERS WANT AD AGENCIES TO CUT TIES WITH BIG OIL

The responsibility of advertisers

The question for ad agencies, according to University of Pittsburgh marketing professor CB Bhattacharya, is whether they want to be involved.

"There are two bookends: vaguely right and precisely wrong," Bhattacharya added. "Saying you are sustainable and then working secretly with these companies is what I call precisely wrong. It goes against the grain of what purpose actually represents in business."

"If you are going to be friends with Exxon and BP and Shell and you want to advertise on their behalf, then don't say you're trying to make the world a better place."

CB Bhattacharya, H.J. Zoffer chair in sustainability and ethics,
University of Pittsburgh

Solitaire Townsend launched U.K.-based agency Futerra with a focus on environmental issues 20 years ago and has been watching the ad industry slowly build momentum in the climate space ever since.

"Advertising is really early on in its journey," she said, noting that many agencies are just beginning to measure the environmental footprint of their own operations. While each agency's footprint is important to address, those are dwarfed by the footprint of

their clients.

Pointing out that disconnect is central to the work of Clean Creatives. In its report, titled "The F-List," the group highlighted the wide gulf between what an agency or holding company claims to be committed to in its own sustainability policy and what it might be willing to promote for a client.

Agencies respond

Dentsu International, which declined to comment for this story, announced over the summer that it had cut emissions by over 20%. The agency holding company claimed it transitioned to all renewable energy last year and is on track to hit net-zero operations by 2030. As Clean Creatives pointed out, that doesn't include the impact of the work that mcgarrybowen does for Chevron or that iProspect does for Ampol.

IPG, another holding company listed in the report, commented on the complexities of navigating a world in an energy transition.



Interpublic Group 
@InterpublicIPG



IPG is one week into our 21 day sustainability challenge to collectively save 50,000 KGs of CO2 and 1,000,000 L of Water. Join the IPG Sustainability Allies team on the ActNow app to start saving! Learn more about #IPGClimateAction:
interpublic.com/news/ipg-emplo...

5:07 PM · Apr 29, 2021 (i)

♡ 8
💬
🔗 Copy link to Tweet

[Tweet your reply](#)

"At IPG, we are working to mitigate our impacts on the environment, and to be more responsible citizens of our communities," a spokesperson told Adweek in an email. "This is a work in progress that we are dedicated to for the long-term. While some of our companies work with energy clients, we do not work with any clients or on any campaigns that deny climate change."

Clean Creatives' report noted that three IPG-owned agencies, Carmichael Lynch, Weber-Shandwick and UM Media, worked with fossil fuel companies in recent years. In a case study on its campaign for Conoco, which included a **47-minute lo-fi mix** and a social-first manga-inspired campaign targeting 18- to 24-year-olds, Carmichael Lynch claims that the brand sold "40 million more gallons of gas in the campaign's first five months compared to the year prior." That bullet point was taken off the website after it was pointed out in an Earther story by journalist Molly Taft.

conoco
5,000 followers

[View profile](#)

[View more on Instagram](#)

729 likes

conoco The Conoco Lofi glug glug mix

Relax. Tune in. Tune out everything else while you listen to 47 minutes of original lofi beats at the link in our bio. Where will you be listening?

[view all 47 comments](#)

Add a comment...

-
-
-
-
-

'Creativity is never neutral'

Of the other holding companies listed in the report, Publicis and Omnicom did not respond to Adweek's requests for comment. Havas and WPP declined to comment on the report specifically.

Havas did clarify that its London agency, Havas London, is incorrectly named in the report. Its sister agencies, Havas Events, Havas People and Havas Sports and Entertainment held contracts with ExxonMobil, BP and TotalEnergies, respectively, as recently as 2019. Havas Events is no longer part of the holding company, and the other two agencies have terminated their relationships with the fossil fuel companies, according to a spokesperson.

“Creativity always serves something else—it either serves selling product or it serves reputation or it serves climate solutions.”

Solitaire Townsend, chief solutionist and co-founder, Futerra

Edelman, the [PR agency behind ExxonMobil's recent slew of Facebook ads](#) urging regional users to oppose climate policy, according to a report by Earther, also did not respond to Adweek's request for comment. We also reached out to VaynerMedia, which declined to comment, and M&C Saatchi, which did not respond to our request.

Still, Futerra's Townsend is encouraged by the progress she's seen and a shift among talent to prioritize climate values when looking for work.

A new kind of agency

Advertising's broader cultural impact is what Jonathan Hanson, co-founder and chief creative officer at Unconquered, refers to as "sway." It's the unique power of advertising and public relations to make something cool or less cool by changing public perception. But that should come with a greater sense of responsibility, he argues.

"I think there's a moral obligation on behalf of agency leadership to guide those conversations," Hanson said. For Unconquered, a purpose-led creative agency, that includes signing the Clean Creatives pledge. "There's so much greenwashing and so much hopping on the bandwagon without really thinking through what that means and the implications of that."

Glaser, the young creative who took a risk by refusing to work on a tobacco account, is now head of growth at Hanson's agency. After several years in the traditional agency world, she joined Unconquered, which vets clients to ensure that their values are aligned before doing work for them. Because of the agency's climate commitments, fossil fuel companies do not make the cut.

"Agencies are responsible not only for their own agency actions, but also for the choices that they make for themselves and who they choose to work with," Glaser said.

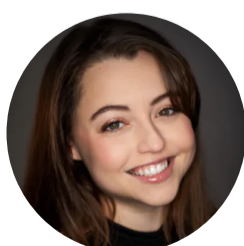
Don't miss **The Business of Marketing** podcast featuring leading c-suite executives sharing insights on the importance of leveraging the intersectionality of marketing, finance, technology, HR and the boardroom to drive business growth. [Tune in.](#)



Kathryn Lundstrom

[@klundster](#) kathryn.lundstrom@adweek.com

Kathryn Lundstrom is Adweek's sustainability reporter.



Emmy Liederman

[@emmyliederman](#) emmy.liederman@adweek.com

Emmy is an Adweek staff writer covering ad agencies.