

A Former Client Gone Wrong

by Hank Stewart

There's one logo on our client page that has become a real conversation starter: [BP](#).

Yes, BP used to be a Green Team client. As such, we include its logo on the page of "Companies We've Worked With" during our credentials presentations. These days, that logo stands out like a big, green and yellow bull's-eye.

"You need to get rid of that one."

"Do you still work with them?"

"Green Team worked with BP?"

The reactions vary, but there is a universal air of curiosity. So we answer the questions and fill in the blanks. Yes, we used to work with BP. No, we don't anymore. Haven't in ten years. We helped them promote their cultural and environmental NGO partnerships. Yes, they were a great client. Yes, it was a great brand. Yes, it's a shame.

Green Team worked with BP when [Lord John Browne](#) was at the helm. In 1997, Browne became the first major oil executive to stand up and acknowledge not only the reality of global warming, but also his industry's role in it. He was ostracized by his peers.

We worked with BP in 2000, when the brand repositioned itself (with brilliant work from Ogilvy) to stand for something new, "Beyond Petroleum." BP introduced the concept of a carbon footprint into the general consciousness through its TV commercials. Pretty radical at the time. And then, to show the world it wasn't just flippantly dishing out advertising hyperbole, BP became the largest producer of solar energy in the world. Sure, solar still represented only a small fraction of the BP energy portfolio, but as the commercials said at the time, "It's a start."

Both the general public and the investment community rewarded BP for its progressive stance. [The Reputation Institute](#) ranked BP #28 in overall brand reputation in the UK. For the sake of comparison, Exxon was #148 (out of 150).

From a Green Team perspective, BP was a great client. The people we worked with not only allowed us to produce great work, they insisted upon it. They were a smart, determined group, many of whom we still maintain close ties with today.

Then the wheels started falling off the BP wagon. In 2006, Lord Browne stepped down amidst scandal. [There was a refinery explosion](#) in Texas, a pipeline leak in [Alaska](#). The new CEO, [Tony Hayward](#), suggested that the company may divest itself of its alternative energy holdings, inviting cynics to proclaim that BP now stood for "Back to Petroleum."

Then came April 20, 2010.

Now BP is watching its reputation and value plummet. In a recent g-Think survey, [Awakening Consumers](#) seem poised to punish BP for the Gulf of Mexico spill. Prior to the spill, 61% of respondents said they had purchased gas at a BP station. But in the wake of the spill, only 12% say they will again, and a whopping 43% say they will never again patronize BP.

In that same survey, [Awakening Consumers](#) gave the pre-spill BP a responsibility rating of 5.85 (on a scale of 1-10; 1 being least responsible, 10 being most responsible). Over a month into the ongoing spill, that rating has dropped to 2.35.

On April 19, BP stock closed at \$59.48 a share. As of press time, it's trading at \$38.20. The company has lost an estimated \$50 billion of market value since the spill, and [Credit Suisse analysts](#) estimate spill-related costs could reach \$37 billion.

Besides the obvious outrage, there seems to be an element of schadenfreude in the public sentiment toward BP today. It's understandable, and serves as a cautionary tale for any brand that promotes itself as being environmentally responsible, then changes its mind. An offshore rig explosion and resulting oil spill could have happened to any oil company, but it happened to BP, and that just may mean the end of what was—at one time—a great brand and a great client. And that's a shame.