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The Biggest Lie

In our modern society, the demand for energy has risen dramatically in the last few decades, whereas supply is limited and primarily comes from a few risky and dangerous forms such as nuclear reactors, coal-burning plants, and oil. As a consequence, disasters occur more frequently with serious damage: Less than a year ago, America was shocked by the Deepwater platform explosion and the unprecedented oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. This mishap caused eleven deaths and resulted in millions of gallons of oil floating in the Gulf, destroying the ecosystem and impacting the lives of millions of people. The incident, of course, has impaired the BP oil company's reputation. Thus, the BP "Gulf of Mexico Response: Communities" video advertisement is an effort by the company to convey a message to people who directly suffer from the spill and to address the anger of the general public. Using highly descriptive language and constructive images as emotional appeals, BP attempts to reclaim their image as a responsible company that will work to help people overcome the disaster.

The video clip is a part of the "Making It Right" campaign, which aims to show that BP is working hard to fix the problem and to deliver an obligatory apology. It starts with slow, smooth music and the voice of a BP representative, Iris Cross, explaining the frustration of people who are directly impacted by the oil spill. Throughout the clip, she is shown as a passionate woman who willingly listens to their concerns and is sympathetic to their losses. As BP's representative, Iris Cross provides statistical information, such as "four hundred million dollars in claims" and "twenty billion dollar independently-run claim fund," to the audience. The clip ends with a nine-second monologue talking about her personal life to enhance the message and make it more appealing.

Using specific indications such as images of an African-American woman, impacted regions, and frustrated citizens, BP directly appeals to a target audience of people who directly suffer from the spill. By posting the ad on *Youtube*, BP is able to reach national and potentially international audiences, who have access to the Internet and are interested in the catastrophe. In addition, the ad also broadcasts on national television channels, making BP's message more visible and accessible to Americans. Unquestionably, the clip has a dual effect: While making it very narrative and specific, focusing on the impacted region and the people who suffer from the spill, BP also implicitly sends a broader message to a national audience that "we" are a responsible company and "we" will keep our promises.

The first few frames of the ad must be conspicuous and are the most important feature of the whole clip because they catch the attention of the audience, influencing their decision of whether to continue watching the rest or not. In the BP ad, the first scene is a composition of T-shirt colors worn by three women: starting from the left with a dark purple, moving to black in the middle, and bright orange in the right corner. Hence, the bright orange is the most outstanding color, which helps audiences to recognize the main character – Iris Cross, BP Community Outreach. The next

scenes show that Iris Cross is communicating with people, reinforcing the message by her own speech, "my job is to listen to the needs and frustrations." Her visual appearance is blended perfectly with the audio effects: a charming, yet distinctive voice, with a background of slow and smooth guitar music. Within the first few seconds, the ad has successfully captured the audience's attention and created an emotional appeal.

The color of Cross's shirt poses an interesting question about the intensity of the psychological decision and its effect on the audience's emotions. Since most of her clients are portrayed in neutral or cold colors such as gray, white, blue, and dark blue, Cross comes into view with a bright, hot color, orange, which reaches the audience's subconscious. The color orange can be interpreted in positive or negative ways depending on the situation. Iris Cross's bright orange T-shirt is symbolic of enthusiasm, happiness, success, and encouragement, which aims for the ultimate goal of the ad. Thanks to the positive effects of the orange color, BP advertisers want the audience to forget about the severe damage of the spill and focus on the healing process; they want to paint a brilliant picture about the future outcome and ensure the public that everything will be okay. It is also interesting because BP's logo is a combination of white, bright yellow, light green, and green, which are not related to Cross' T-shirt color. The advertisers must have deliberately made this risky decision and chosen to keep it consistent as an essential part of the whole composition. Because of their bad reputation due to the oil spill, BP tries to put a distance between the logo's colors and the ad and any connection that could lead to serious consequences. The orange color not only stimulates the subconscious level of the audience to make an emotional appeal but also makes Cross eye-catching and noticeable among others. Emotional appeal is constantly reinforced to convey the "we will make this right" message, and every single element in the clip is carefully arranged.

The language used in the speech is also a part of the emotional appeal that BP sends to the audience. Instead of using formal language, Iris Cross approaches the audience with a spoken-style language and careful word choices. Many affirmative and supportive words are used such as, "listen," "responsibility," "inform," "help," and "commitment," while negative words such as "frustration" and "lost" are carefully selected and limited. Phrases are commonly used to enhance the word choice effect: "full responsibility," "keeping you informed," "restoring the jobs," "cover lost income," and "get back to work." Certain words are constantly repeated such as "listen," "help," and "jobs" to appeal to the audience. By using different word-choice strategies in this positive way, BP appears to the audience to be diligent and persistent. The word-choice strategies inform people that BP will be there to help, to listen, and to fulfill their needs. Positive words also conciliate the aggressive mood and make the audience relaxed and comfortable, which helps them open their minds to accept the message.

To augment the emotional appeal and personal credibility, logical appeals are also often used in a formal argument to persuade people. However, in BP's advertisement, logical appeals are omitted due to the perceived loss of trustworthiness and sincerity. Since the general public is already angry at BP's reckless decisions and irresponsible behavior, they are less likely to believe any logical claims that are made by BP. Furthermore, because of the available and accessible information from the Internet and different media platforms, any misleading claim that is made by BP would have sub-

stantial effects on their image. As a result, the BP advertisement emphasizes emotion rather than logic.

Although the advertisement predominantly appeals to people's sentiments, BP also gains credibility by using an African-American character to convince a regional audience to believe in its message. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 32.5% of the population identifies as African-American in Louisiana (US Census Bureau). In New Orleans, where Iris Cross was born, African-Americans comprises an overwhelming majority of the city's population with 67.3% (US Census Bureau). Since New Orleans is the most populous region that is severely impacted by the spill, it is important that Iris Cross, as an African-American native of the area, appears to them as a member of the community, which creates trustworthiness and credibility in her speech. The ability to convince people solely based on race is a natural gift that Iris Cross possesses, and BP advertisers take full advantage of this to convey their message. As she particularly emphasizes at the end of the ad, "my family still lives here"; Cross implicitly sends a message that her family suffers from the spill just as other New Orleans residents do. Here, the "in-group" feeling closes the distance and adds a degree of comfort between Cross and her audience. The "in-group" feeling also has the same effect with other races and ethnicities that live in the region. They don't have to be African-American, but they know that she understands their pains and their struggles, which ameliorates the negative feelings toward BP Company and the spill incident.

The emphasis on racial tension is even more intense with the involvement of gender and the precise timing of the monologue when BP chooses Iris Cross as the representative for this traditionally British corporation. It would be difficult but not impossible to find an alternate African-American who is male, possibly with some experience in the drilling industry, to speak for BP. However, BP chose an ordinary woman without any specialty or expertise as a representative in the ad. The message here is clear: She is one of "us," and "we" share the common understanding. Emotional appeal and personal credibility are intertwined. Because of the lack of expertise and industry-specific credibility as well as her identity as a woman, Iris Cross is more compelling to people who are worried about their future; this concern drives their interest more than statistical information. The perfect timing of her monologue also contributes to the successful message. After speaking for about a minute, using different methods to convey the message to the audience and setting the mood, Iris Cross directly faces the audience and uses her personal life and body language to convey BP's commitment to clean up the aftermath of the oil spill. For audiences who are already convinced by the ad, the monologue reinforces the desired impression, assuring them that everything will be okay; for audiences who are still skeptical and cynical about BP's effort, the monologue is a nice impression that they can think about later, which can eventually change their minds.

Iris Cross's nine-second monologue at the end not only strengthens the message that has been sent out but is also a beautiful illustration of every single element that has been used to convey the message. Her bright orange shirt contrasts nicely with the light-green net and blue sky in the background. Using the first person in her verbal summary, "I'm gonna to be here until we make it right," Iris Cross makes the problem become a personal matter and bridges a gap between herself and BP. It is a

beautiful tie up and is a marvelous example of how public relations and advertising can change the perception of public opinion in a very negatively perceived incident.

The BP advertisement clip has done a terrific job of conveying the message to different audience groups about the effort to clean up the aftermath of the oil spill. Using emotional appeal as the main tactic, BP tries to convince people that they are a responsible company that will help people overcome the terrible mishap. However, the effect of the advertising campaign is still debatable because of the gap between what is said and what has been done. According to *Youtube*, the overwhelming majority of viewers "dislike" the clip, which could be explained by different reasons. BP supplies misinformation about the amount of oil that leaked to the gulf. They also failed to react immediately to stop the leak and clean up the Gulf; only when the federal government threatened to impose regulations and fines did they begin the process of stopping the leak. Moreover, the last straw that explodes public anger was when BP CEO, Tony Hayward, publicly complained in the media that "I'd like my life back" (Durando). Because of several erroneous and reckless decisions, BP continues to suffer from the predicament that they have created.

WORKS CITED

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