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English 137H

14 October 2013

The Oil Spill: A (Rhetorical) Disaster

Rhetoric used by the British Petroleum Corporation (BP) in a recent newspaper advertisement about ongoing issues with the massive oil spill of April 20, 2010 contrasts with two radically different uses of rhetoric earlier in the spill situation. It is interesting to see how this giant corporation floundered, caught itself, and now keeps changing its message and methods as the situation evolves.

The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico off the Louisiana coast killed 11 workers and led to the release of between 2.45 million and 4.9 million gallons of oil. BP provided the lower estimate; the federal government made the higher estimate. It took 87 days to cap the well, and it turned into the largest offshore oil spill in U.S. history (Kraus). Every day until the burning well was capped, graphic photographs ran in all kinds of media showing the spreading oil and its effects on animals, beaches, wetlands, and fishermen. Not only was it an environmental and economic disaster for the Gulf Coast, it was a public relations disaster for BP, which uses a logo that is a combination of the sun and green leaves.

While any individual or company could be expected to flounder at the beginning of a crisis, BP, and specifically its CEO Tony Hayward, used rhetoric so poorly that their thoughtless approach worsened the situation and set the stage for the media to paint BP as an even greater villain. In the first few days, BP was secretive and inaccurate in giving out information on the severity of the situation and was very free in casting blame on everyone but itself. Mr. Hayward was quoted as asking “What the hell did we do to deserve this?” In spite of searing photographs of the spread of the oil, he also completely missed the point by minimizing the spill and announcing that “The Gulf of Mexico is a very big ocean. The amount of volume of oil and dispersant we are putting into it is tiny in relation to the total water volume.” (Fletcher).

BP’s initial position of denial reads as the opposite of effective rhetoric. Because BP quickly destroyed its own credibility by seeming not to understand the scope of the disaster, BP did not demonstrate ethos. The company’s poor use of logos relates to its lack of ethos: by providing too little information, and by issuing false information, BP essentially allowed others, including the media, to step in and substitute other stories for the one that BP tried to push. Although BP seemed to expect that the public might feel some sympathy for it, the company probably never had a chance to use pathos, since the public’s immediate empathy went to the victims and the environment. BP forgot the most important aspect of their situation: the public sympathizes with themselves, not corporations. The public protects their own people first, especially before a foreign oil company. Mr. Hayward’s clumsy statements, including saying “I want my life back,” only worsened the public’s anger toward the company. BP’s initial response of cover-up enraged the victims’ families. Its dishonest approach and its failure to use persuasive rhetoric caused tremendous public resentment. The situation led to a huge drop in the company’s stock price and to the end of Mr. Hayward’s job.

After blundering so badly in its first response to the spill, BP’s second use of rhetoric was careful and polished. In 2012, BP agreed to a multi-billion dollar settlement meant to clean up the oil and compensate victims. At this point, BP held the position of one of the most hated companies in America, and they realized that they had to turn around public opinion. After the cleanup and payouts began, BP started a charm offensive and ran video and print ads in many media outlets talking about their commitment to cleaning up the environment and to helping the people who had been harmed economically by the spill(Phipper2011). BP’s public relations campaign was intended to persuade Americans that the region has recovered.

The campaign’s use of rhetoric, however, caused some skepticism. The ads did feature beautiful and appealing visual images, including children playing on clean beaches, happy shrimp fishermen heading out on their boats, and people eating seafood at outdoor restaurants. The company’s earlier poor response to the spill had damaged its ethos, however. Many people still think of BP as the wolf in sheep’s clothing, and few people are willing to take the company’s word that the gulf has recovered. The ads also made no use of logos, or facts and statistics that might have proved that the millions of gallons of oil on the bottom of the gulf were not doing damage, or that all the fishermen and tourist interests that had been harmed were back on track. The rosy pictures combined with the lack of solid information seem to suggest a surface treatment only and actually worked against ethos and logos. In terms of pathos, the ads just remind us of the hundreds of previous images of the spill and destruction it caused to lives and the environment. We easily link these pretty new pictures with the earlier stark pictures by photo-journalists. Just as with the spill, our empathy still goes to the victims, and not to BP.

In BP’s third use of rhetoric, the company again takes a completely new approach. Everything changed this year when the court-appointed administrator began to award settlement money from BP in ways that were going to cost the company billions more than it had agreed to. The company claims that millions are being paid out to scores of lawyers and individuals and businesses that did not experience any loss from the effects of the spill, and that the administrator failed to do a good job documenting the damage and the need for payments. This situation led to the advertisement that ran recently in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Washington Post*. The current ad poses an interesting contrast to the rhetoric used in both of the previous approaches taken by BP: first the denials, then the celebration of what they called a recovery. This time the ad targets BP’s stockholders, politicians, and opinion-makers, all of whom have tremendous influence, and even the courts themselves. BP needed to convince these audiences that it knows what it is talking about, that it is telling the truth (this time), and also to gain sympathy for its position so that the court might rein in the administrator.

Rhetorically, the third attempt at establishing itself as a credible company with an important message works much more effectively than the previous two. This ad begins with statistics showing how much BP already has paid out in settlements for the spill. “So far, we’ve spent $14 billion on response and cleanup to help restore the environment. We’ve also paid more than 300,000 claims totaling over $12 billion to help restore the Gulf economy.” By using quantification, BP appears fact-based, in control, and responsible. Using data is an effective way to establish logos. Better use of logos usually results in a more effective ethos, and this ad successfully achieves that. BP goes on to establish their credibility with the ad’s simple layout that uses text only. It is very professional looking, without any color, images or indented paragraphs. This serious graphic style suggests a straightforward no-nonsense approach by the company, as opposed to its past fluffy spin. It helps restore some of the company’s credibility because it makes them appear as though they are handling their matters seriously and professionally.

BP’s also uses pathos effectively for the first time. Reading through the full-page advertisement, one can see that BP is trying to appear as the victim this time. They do not take responsibility for the spill, but they do try to gain our respect by writing “Three years ago BP made a commitment to the people of the Gulf...to ensure that people who suffered losses from the accident would keep being paid.” The plain language of the ad reads in a conversational way and makes the company seem less corporate and more human and approachable. The ad uses warm words and phrases such as “good faith,” and “helping as many deserving people as possible.” After the ad explains the current complaint, again using plain language, BP uses one of the most effective tools of pathos: seeking common agreement. It writes “Whatever you think about BP, we can all agree that it’s wrong for anyone to take money they don’t deserve.” BP even puts itself in the same camp as the victims of the spill by writing “And it’s unfair to everyone in the Gulf – commercial fishermen, restaurant and hotel owners, and all the other hard-working people who’ve filed legitimate claims.”

If BP had initially taken the stance that they do now, the anger and mistrust would not have had a chance to grow to such great size. Because of the early floundering, the public still has a hard time telling what BP’s true intentions are. Kairos, or the opportune moment, went completely wrong. BP let the opportune moments pass time and time again. Although they made a skillful move in the end, their first stance toward the spill put a damper on the chance of them fully restoring their image. Although their sincerity in wanting a better settlement comes though convincingly in the latest ads, their image took too big a hit to rebound regardless of how they approached this. Effective ethos, logos, and pathos can only take an argument so far and timing can make or break a campaign. Hopefully, other corporations have paid close attention to this situation and will avoid making the same mistakes.

I am not the only one who thinks that BP’s rhetoric in this third attempt was convincing. After I completed the first draft of this essay, BP got what it wanted from the court, and put out this press release

Today's ruling affirms what BP has been saying since the beginning: claimants should not be paid for fictitious or wholly non-existent losses. We are gratified that the systematic payment of such claims by the claims administrator must now come to an end.(BP Press Office)

It will be interesting to see where BP’s advertising goes in the future, and what rhetorical devices it employs.

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