

Do these 'feel-good' ads really inspire goodwill?

The latest Shell ad lauds Shell's Public Affairs manager for his involvement in developmental and educational projects in Southern Africa.

He trudges through rural midlands to a background of mawkish piano-plunking as the voice-over extols the good that he, a typical employee of Shell, does for these people "starved of hope".

All this is good and well, but the cynic in me decries Shell's possible motivation in instigating these social welfare projects. Are they not simply a smokescreen to draw attention from the environmental devastation often caused by large oil companies?

The ASA recently had to field a complaint against the ad for this very reason. The complainant referred to events occurring in Nigeria in 1995 and a Sunday Times newspaper article entitled "The wounds that still bleed oil...". I view Shell's response that the series of international television commercials refer to their contributions to sustainable development world-wide AFTER the 1995 events in Nigeria as disingenuous. It calls to mind a stretch of pearly-white beach, but with a thick layer of tar just several inches below the surface.

Perhaps I'm a product of my generation. I've read that Generation Y are naturally more cynical than Generation X was about ads that push an image and a feeling. The worst of advertising preys on the gullibility of people, much like politicians. The war in Iraq surely is one of liberation, all right - liberation of the oil fields.

Pity the oil companies, perhaps. With the nature of their product and their past record it must be extremely tough coming up with an effective ad campaign, but I honestly feel that with their present tack they could be seriously underestimating the younger generation's tolerance of their blatant hypocrisy.

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