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Green Grow the Neutrons-O

The advertising world can turn anything green - including nuclear power.

Robert Woods reveals some of the tricks of the trade.

In a British advertising agency, two stereotypes - both with striped shirts and red braces - are talking.

Justin: OK, Nigel, clients due in 10 minutes, let's have a final run through. The brief is: with environmental consciousness as consumer flavour-of-the-month, we have to Make Nuclear Power Green.

Nigel: We have to make nuclear power *seem* green.

Justin: Same thing, Nige old boy. The consumer must be seen to be green. The Government in its wisdom has hacked nuclear power, so nuclear power must be seen to be green as well. Dammit, there are votes at stake. No-one minds a few Greenpeace loonies demonstrating, but when you get nice middle-class housewives not wanting a nuclear station in their backyard, you're in trouble. One government has already fallen over green issues.

Nigel: Only a Dutch one.

Justin: Yes, but even so. We can avert that danger here. If people buy Volvos because they think a better car will plug the hole in the ozone layer, they will buy nuclear power on the same principle.

Nigel: Oh, stop getting so philosophical. Just give me the facts.

Justin: There are no facts in advertising. You know that.

Nigel: I mean the facts that we're meant to sell. About nuclear

power being environment-friendly.

Justin: 'It's clean, it's safe, it's non-polluting, and, as we both know:

Both: IT DOESN'T ADD TO THE GREENHOUSE EFFECT'

Realizing that they have an easy theme for an otherwise unsellable product, they join hands and do a music-hall turn singing:

NonpollutingOzonepluggingGreenseemingGreenhousesavingNUKE!

Nigel: Yes, folks, dirty coal-burning power stations create carbon dioxide - the greenhouse gas that warms the earth, brings disastrous climate changes, melts our ice-caps and threatens to flood our cities. Only Batman Can Avert This Threat!

Justin: You mean 'Only Nuclear Power Can Avert This Threat!'

Nigel: Yes, sorry - got a bit carried away there.

Stops the music-hall turn, and comes down to earth.

Nigel: But 40 leading scientists *do* say that carbon dioxide is made in producing uranium and building the reactors, and power stations are not the main source of greenhouse gases anyway; and nuclear programmes divert money from energy-saving programmes, and it takes six years to build a nuclear power station and you can save that amount of carbon dioxide in six months by saving energy.

Justin: You can always find a scientist to back any position, no matter how absurd.

Nigel: But 17 of these are Fellows of the Royal Society.

Justin: Doesn't matter. Their arguments are slightly complex, requiring thought. Against our simple, easy-to-grasp message, they stand no chance. I mean, which is easier to put across in a 40-second commercial?

Nigel: 'It beats as it sweeps as it plugs up the hole in the ozone layer?'

Justin: Precisely, old lad. Not a bad slogan either. But flippancy is better suited to selling food - so unless you buckle down it's back to the Fission Chips account for you.

Nigel: I hate your puns. But listen, we still have an image problem. What about the geese born with heads on backwards? Or the couple who are suing because they couldn't sell their house on account of the plutonium in the vacuum-cleaner dust?

Justin: Those aren't facts, they're fears.

Nigel: Chernobyl is a fact.

Justin: Chernobyl is the biggest fear that we are trying to stop people thinking about.

Nigel: How do we do it?

Justin: We reassure them that it won't happen again without actually mentioning that it did happen. A simple code- word is all we need, understood by everybody. It is...

Nigel: Responsibility.

Justin: Exactly.

Nigel: As in 'With This Much Power Comes This Much Responsibility'.

Justin: The implication is clear enough, I think. Our power-station workers are far too responsible to fiddle with controls they don't understand. They are dependable. Salt of the earth. Not like the Russians - you'd expect their nuclear power stations to go wrong.

Nigel: I know - maybe we should rename nuclear power. A rose by any other name smells infinitely sweeter.

Justin: Patience, boyo, not till after the next accident. But you are right about the image. We have to get nuclear power seen as the Volvo of the power industry: safe, efficient and reliable.

Nigel: But without a safety cage?

Justin: Analogies can be carried too far. Right. Let's see Presentation One. Stick the video in, Nigel. This is the *play-on-fear-of-Greenhouse-effect one*.

The lights dim. The video flickers into action. A portentous voice announces:

Portentous Voice: 'Scientists say that the greatest threat to our planet is global warming ... (Picture of a child with a garden hose under a blazing sun. The water from the hose stops. The child looks fearfully at the sky.) 'The greenhouse effect' (Picture changes to a different child standing in a desert.) 'Glaciers melt' (Picture of a lump of ice, dripping; time is running out.) 'The seas rise, flooding our cities'

(Threatening picture of a wave rising to overwhelm; seen from the front, as if the viewer is about to be swallowed and filmed in slow motion to add tension.)

Portentous Voice (turning kind): 'Suppose there was a power that *didn't* add to the greenhouse effect; that didn't burn

limited fossil fuel. A power that served humankind without harming the planet we live on. A *clean* power. Shouldn't we have the courage to embrace that power?'

(Picture of skylark ascending. Clear blue sky. Happy music. Caption across screen: 'Nuclear Power: Courage for a Clean Future.')

Portentous Voice again: 'Some day, your children will thank you.'

Nigel collapses into laughter. He intones:

Nigel: Suppose there was a power that caused birth defects in sheep and people. That made the Irish Sea the most radioactive stretch of water in the world. That produced a form of waste that was highly toxic and radioactive; that will remain dangerous for thousands of years and that no-one has yet thought of a way of disposing of? Shouldn't we have the courage to say 'This is not a terribly good idea?'

Justin: Be fair, this ad was your brainchild.

Nigel: How true. The things we all do to earn an honest living. And seeing as it was my brainchild, would you not say it was possibly the best commercial of all time?

Justin: No. Too messianic, too end-of-the-worldish. And with a sensitive subject like nuclear power, the end of the world is the last thing we want to remind the punters of.

Nigel: You prefer your idea of the vile, lisping child, I suppose?

Justin: Actually, I do. It puts over the message succinctly and simply: nuclear power is clean - coal power is dirty. And there are a lot of hidden fears about coal miners as bogey-men we can play on: nasty dark creatures from underground...

Nigel: But we've used the lisping child gag in the electricity commercials already, haven't we? A horrid kid actor mouthing fake-innocent puns: 'You can eat a currant bun so why can't you eat an electric current?'

Justin: We've used it before, so what? Why knock a winning system? Stick it in the video.

The lights dim as before.

(Shot of seven-year-old child waiting in nice middle-class hallway for daddy to come home. A playmate is alongside.)

Child 1 (lisping): My daddy handles more power than your daddy. My daddy makes power for *everyone*.

Child 2 (pensive): 'Mummy says that in the old days daddy would have worked down a coal mine to make power for people, and he'd have come home all black and dirty, and the coal he made would have covered everything with soot and smoke.'

(Camera pans through window to show that the front garden is green and beautiful with no industry in sight.)

Child 1: 'I don't think I'd like hugging daddy if he was all covered in soot like from a fireplace. It would make my clothes all dirty.'

Child 2: 'It would make *everything* dirty.'

Child 1: 'What, the whole world?'

Child 2: 'Yes, that's what my mummy says. And the air, and the sea, and the garden...'

(Daddy strides down the garden path, walks in with briefcase to show he no longer uses a pick-axe. He bends to embrace children. Close-up of briefcase reveals a Nuclear Fuels logo on it. Caption across screen reads: 'Responsible Power. For Responsible People'.)

Justin: I like that. It shows that nuclear power workers are nice, middle-class people who wouldn't hurt the environment for anything.

Nigel: Nuclear workers for nuclear families, I suppose.

Justin: And what's wrong with that? Our man with a briefcase almost certainly drives a Volvo. The ad works at a subconscious level too.

Nigel: OK, OK - but we'd better hurry. The client should be here any minute. Have we got the brochure?

Justin: Yes.

Nigel: Did we change the cover to green?

Justin: Yes.

Nigel: Did we print it on recycled paper?

Justin: God, no, it would look like bog-roll. What sort of cheapskate outfit would they think we are? We're trying to impress people, remember, not save the world...

Robert Woods (a pseudonym) is a sleeper working undercover for a right-wing UK newspaper.