Abstract: In 1870, when John D. Rockefeller, Sr. changed the name of the company he founded to Standard Oil, he had not only envisioned and put in place the structure of today’s oil industry, but also set in motion something unintended: the negative perception of that industry by the general public and other stakeholder groups. Throughout its corporate existence, Standard Oil used both legitimate and illegitimate methods to win in the marketplace. The illegitimate methods were the most damaging to the Standard Oil brand. Big Oil may see its current use of aggressive marketplace tactics as remaining true to Rockefeller’s vision of competition but in today’s business environment, the oil industry’s poor corporate image remains intact.

In 1870, when John D. Rockefeller, Sr. changed the name of the company he founded to Standard Oil, he had not only envisioned and put in place the structure of today’s oil industry, but also set in motion something unintended: the negative perception of that industry by the general public and other stakeholder groups, including competing firms, local politicians, and state governments. Throughout its corporate existence, Standard Oil used both legitimate and illegitimate methods to win in the marketplace. The illegitimate methods were the most damaging to the Standard Oil brand. Big Oil may see its current use of aggressive marketplace tactics as remaining true to Rockefeller’s vision of competition but in today’s business environment, the oil industry’s poor corporate image remains intact. There are signs, however, that the oil industry’s image is changing.

Big Oil’s recent marketing campaigns continue to rely on educational themes. Exxon Mobil, using its new “Energy Lives Here” messaging, asks consumers to take their energy quiz. One question asks consumers to identify where most of the United States’ oil comes from. The correct answer of course, is the United States, reflecting the country’s new sources of Shell oil and gas. Shell Oil’s U.S. marketing “Let’s Go” campaign continues the themes of helping the environment and engaging with consumers wherever it operates. The messaging is the same; only the medium has changed from traditional media to social media.

Beginning with Rockefeller’s adoption of the Standard Oil name in 1870, Big Oil has been around for over one hundred and forty years and its negative image has remained virtually intact. Although it might just take another one hundred and forty years to erase it, I’m waiting to find out.
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