

# Marketing lessons from Greenpeace v Shell via Lego

Published 13 October 2014 10:17, Updated 13 October 2014 12:02

**Toby Miller**



Lego will not renew its contract with Shell.

October 9, 2014, was a big day in eco-activism: Lego announced that it would not renew a product-placement deal (<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/oct/09/lego-ends-shell-partnership-following-greenpeace-campaign>) with Shell, following concerted pressure from Greenpeace as part of a campaign to ban Arctic oil exploration by attacking firms associated with such activities.

It is a common tactic of major energy companies to engage in collaborations with companies such as Lego as part of their quest for what they call a “social licence (<http://sociallicense.com/definition.html>)” to operate. That means winning local, national and international community support.

For its part, Lego benefits from the money that comes with product placement; as per a James Bond movie (<http://www.businessinsider.com/heres-how-james-bonds-relationship-with-product-placement-has-changed-2012-10?op=1>), the producers defray their costs well in advance of sales to customers by accepting funding from firms that want to be associated with a happy, friendly, trustworthy image.

In this case, the firm is Greenpeace’s sworn enemy, Shell. As a sub-plot, Lego has been boasting of its green credentials (<http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/lego-design-sustainability-circular-economy>).

On July 1, 2014, Lego said (<http://aboutus.lego.com/en-us/news-room/2014/july/lego-group-comment-on-greenpeace-campaign>): “A co-promotion contract like the one with Shell is one of many ways we are able to bring Lego bricks into the hands of more children.” It went on:

*"The Greenpeace campaign focuses on how Shell operates in a specific part of the world. We firmly believe that this matter must be handled between Shell and Greenpeace. We are saddened when the Lego brand is used as a tool in any dispute between organisations."*

Now, Lego's tune (<http://aboutus.lego.com/en-us/news-room/2014/october/comment-on-the-greenpeace-campaign-and-the-lego-brand>) differs:

*"We continuously consider many different ways of how to deliver on our promise of bringing creative play to more children. We want to clarify that as things currently stand we will not renew the co-promotion contract with Shell when the present contract ends."*

We do not want to be part of Greenpeace's campaign and we will not comment any further on the campaign. We will continue to deliver creative and inspiring Lego play experiences to children all over the world.

This is, surely, one of those moments when a big but pusillanimous multinational corporation withers in the face of critique from a gallant but small non-government organisation – when activism trumps business, ethics triumphs over size, and scale is helpless in the face of righteousness.

It has been hailed (<http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/greenpeaces-biggest-victories-against-corporations-politicians-1469239>) by Greenpeace true believers as “one of the most high-profile victories in its history” thanks to “guerilla tactics”. The organisation itself immodestly announced in an email to its supporters that: “Today was a great day for the Arctic, and for people power.”

But was it? Perhaps this was a smart, sophisticated, well-heeled multinational marketing campaign, undertaken via a vast network, using the services of advertising agencies and borrowing trademarks and copyrights to make a political point?

Is this actually about what happens when multinationals fall out, when two vast companies (Shell and Lego) are separated by another powerful not-for-profit multinational (Greenpeace) revelling in the fantasy that it is David taking on Goliath? One version of these events might read: Greenpeace has not achieved very much in its critiques of Shell, so it went after a soft target. Lego caved in, the victim of a form of secondary boycott.

While the charity argues (<http://www.greenpeace.org.uk/blog/climate/how-lego-got-awesome-savethearctic-20141009>) that its grassroots campaign and direct-action pranks were crucial, one might also say that “wot won it” was a couple of ingenious videos.

The first and most popular took music, words, images and logos from one of the most successful films of the year, The Lego Movie (<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=lego.htm%5D>(<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=lego.htm>), to create a post-modern pastiche ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhbliUqo\\_r4&list=UUTDTSx8kxGECZJxOa9mIKA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhbliUqo_r4&list=UUTDTSx8kxGECZJxOa9mIKA)) aimed at the heartstrings. The second, artier and less direct, was targeted at parents (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ci4I-VK9jew&list=UUTDTSx8kxGECZJxOa9mIKA>).

The first, a brilliant video trope, worked magnificently and has become a case study for ad agencies. As the industry bible Adweek put it (<http://www.adweek.com/adfreak/even-if-you-hate-greenpeace-and-love-lego-you-have-admire-gorgeous-attack-ad-158809>), Greenpeace took “a page from Chipotle’s marketing playbook (<http://www.adweek.com/news/advertising-branding/ad-day-chipotle-makes-magic-again-fiona-apple-and-dark-animated-film-152380>) – haunting animation plus a distressing cover of a well-known song”.

Other actions, such as a few children building anti-oil Lego figures in central London, some adults climbing models at a theme park and fun Lego figures placed in protests across major world cities, were minor irritants at best, drawing predictably minimal press coverage but incarnating a grassroots legitimacy that appeals to donors and old-fashioned activists from pre-social media eras.

But even as the triumph occurred, Shell was luxuriating in Pele’s endorsement (<http://www.thedrum.com/news/2014/09/11/shell-enlists-pele-open-kinetic-energy-favela-football-field>) of it for providing “the world’s first player-powered community football pitch in the centre of Rio Di Janeiro’s favela”.

It will take more than a sophisticated stunt by vanguardist apparatchiks to answer Pele. And it won’t be the action of a brave wee David against a big nasty Goliath – more a contest between rivals for multinational space and control. Greenpeace is well placed to participate, thanks to its vast resources and smart links to ad agencies. But is people power one more marketing tool in this admittedly worthy struggle?

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