

GUEST ESSAY

Worrying About Your Carbon Footprint Is Exactly What Big Oil Wants You to Do

Aug. 31, 2021, 5:00 a.m. ET

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Everybody’s going carbon neutral these days, from the big boys — Amazon, Microsoft, Unilever, Starbucks, JetBlue — to your favorite outdoor brand, even ski resorts. Probably your neighborhood coffee roaster, too.

What’s not to like? Becoming carbon neutral means cutting greenhouse gas emissions as much as you can, then offsetting what you can’t avoid with measures like tree planting. Seems admirable.

Well, not exactly. Carbon neutrality doesn’t achieve any sort of systemic change. A coal-powered business could be entirely carbon neutral as long it stops some landfill gas in Malaysia from entering the atmosphere equal to the emissions it’s still releasing. American fossil fuel dependence would remain intact, and planet-warming emissions would continue to rise. The only way to fix that is through politics, policymakers and legislation. But distressingly, most businesses don’t want to play in that arena.

Instead, they’re doing exactly what the fossil fuel industry wants: staying in their lane, accepting some blame for a global problem and maintaining the dominance of fossil fuels. They’re well intentioned, sure, but also clueless, even complicit.

Imagine if businesses put as much effort into climate *lobbying* as climate neutrality. Corporations wield tremendous influence over the political system. But on climate, most corporations have decided to sit this one out. Notably, the five biggest tech corporations — Apple, Microsoft, Facebook, Alphabet and Amazon — spend only 4 percent of their lobbying dollars on climate, according to Influence Map.

As a result, they avoid the chance to put in place systemic solutions in favor of carbon neutral navel gazing. Large corporations will protest, saying that they are lobbying on climate. But they are typically working both sides of the aisle. And their political contributions are mostly going in the wrong direction. Bloomberg Green examined political donations by more than 100 major American corporations and found last year that they were “throwing their support behind lawmakers who routinely stall climate legislation.”

Climate never ascends to the level of mission-critical issues like trade policy and taxation. Sure, there are exceptions: Salesforce recently said it would intensify its focus on climate lobbying. And Patagonia has always been aggressive, along with Ben and Jerry’s. But they are anomalies, led or inspired by charismatic founders.

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How did it come to this? The story of how what’s considered the best approach to corporate sustainability became complicity with the very industry responsible for climate change starts with the famous “Crying Indian” commercial of the 1970s. The ad, in which an actor portraying a Native American is devastated by the sight of rampant pollution, created several generations of dutiful litter-picker-uppers. (Guilty!) But it wasn’t so benign. It was, in fact, masterly propaganda from the beverage and container industries, designed to place responsibility for the trash problem on American consumers, not manufacturers.

The approach was so good that the fossil fuel industry adopted the very same strategy.

In 2004, BP hired the public relations firm Ogilvy & Mather to improve its image, in part by conveying the message that consumers of oil and natural gas bear the responsibility for their greenhouse gas emissions, not the producers of the oil and gas they use. The result was BP’s ingenious carbon footprint calculator, which allows individuals to calculate the carbon emissions that result from their activities. It’s “about helping you to go carbon neutral — reducing and offsetting your carbon footprint,” BP says on its “target neutral” website.

Nor was BP alone among the big oil companies communicating this message. A study by Naomi Oreskes and Geoffrey Supran at Harvard published in May in the journal *One Earth* found that since 1972, ExxonMobil has consistently used “rhetoric aimed at shifting responsibility for climate change away from itself and onto consumers.”

Yes, those consumers want the hot showers, warm homes and cold beer that coal, oil and gas provide. But they did not insist on the burning of fossil fuels for those amenities. Now there are other ways to produce energy, and responsibility to tap those renewable resources lies with the world’s energy companies.

Today, almost 20 years after BP's carbon calculator went live, cutting a firm's carbon footprint is still the gold standard of corporate climate action. The phrase is firmly lodged in the environmental lexicon.

The idea of offsetting one's carbon footprint by reducing or eliminating greenhouse gas emissions in one place to make up for emissions elsewhere has grown into an enormous industry. Businesses often do this by buying carbon credits to offset emissions they can't or won't reduce. The consulting firm McKinsey estimates that "the market for carbon credits could be worth upward of \$50 billion in 2030."

Many of these offsets underwrite worthwhile projects — protecting virgin expanses in some of the world's last great forests, as in the Amazon, or the deployment of solar power. But according to an analysis by the private-sector Taskforce on Scaling Voluntary Carbon Markets, fewer than five percent of offsets in 2020 removed carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Which, of course, is what we desperately need to be doing.

A giant, systemic problem like climate needs to be addressed like other huge environmental challenges the world has successfully taken on — reducing ozone-depleting chemicals worldwide, for example, and sharply cutting back on smog and water pollution in the United States. Imagine if, in response to the expansion of the ozone hole, businesses and governments had said, "We'll just hope businesses do the right thing." Instead, international policymakers created the Montreal Protocol, which set standards that phased out ozone-destroying chlorofluorocarbon use worldwide.

We need more of that approach — citizens, businesses and governments working together to address this crisis. It might result in policy solutions like government regulation, effective carbon taxes, national standards for renewable energy and electrification, the elimination of legacy subsidies for the fossil fuel industry, strict auto emission standards and new national building codes. All of these approaches threaten fossil fuel's business model and, not coincidentally, would help to slow the warming of the planet.

What do fossil fuel companies prefer? They like consumers and corporations to do anything and everything as long as they stay out of the companies' way and avoid doing anything that could actually make a difference.

Tragically, the overwhelming majority of American businesses are on a path of complicity. Their climate strategy avoids conflict and generates great P.R. Unfortunately, it also allows fossil fuel interests to monetize their remaining assets unhindered, ensuring catastrophe for all.

How carbon neutral is that?

Is one of your favorite places in your country being affected by climate change?

Describe that place — a beloved campsite, the levee you run, a local market, the woods you explored as a child — and tell us in a brief voice mail why you love it: (+01) 405-804-1422. What does this place mean to you, how is it changing, and how do you feel seeing it reshaped by environmental issues?

We are interested in hearing from the global community. Please include your country code with your phone number in your message so that we can reach you with any questions. We may use a portion of your message in a future article.

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