



# Conveying the sense-making corporate persona: The Mobil Oil “Observations” columns, 1975–1980



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## ABSTRACT

Since at least the early 20th century, the corporation has arisen in the US as an entity that attempts to help individuals make sense of the world through the use of public relations. Public relations scholarship, however, tends to focus on how corporations primarily articulated their worth through touting how the products and services they offered were constructive to society. This study, however, through a review of Mobil's “Observations” advertorials that ran from 1975 through 1980, reveals how a corporation attempted to build an influential persona by offering a corporate personality, that is an empathetic fellow traveler who is also believable and aspirational. This examination of the presence of the corporate persona points to lingering concerns, especially regarding how well the corporation can realize and communicate its corporate character in a world that is increasingly complicated by the rise of non-traditional information sources (e.g., social media), and interlocking, systemic concerns (e.g., climate change, economic/ecological sustainability). Public relations can assist in better understanding such factors so that the corporate persona can act in ways that benefit stakeholders and society.

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## 1. Introduction

Sense-making, or the ability to use guideposts to navigate the reality of everyday life, has long been informed by an array of institutions – family, church, education, and government clearly have long-established roles in this arena. However, since at least the early 20th century in the US, the rise of industry has provided society an additional sense-maker: the institution of big business. But the corporate entity as a strategic sense-maker for society is a relatively recent development. It is true that, by the late 1800s and into the early 1900s, corporations began to see the value of articulating what they offered society, what they stood for and, in the process, assert some kind of desired order within society. That is, by the early 20th century, business observed that other institutional fields like religion and government intentionally pursued and influenced relationships through public relations activities and the corporation decided to, over time, do the same (Lamme & Russell, 2010). In particular, some scholars (Ewen, 1996; Marchand, 1998; Tedlow, 1979) tracked how corporations used an array of messaging tactics in the early to mid-20th century US to assert they were beneficent contributors to the nation. However, these studies tended to focus on how corporations touted their worth through asserting how their products and services were constructive to society. What is needed in the literature is a focused examination of how the corporation uses public relations – in this case the advertorial – to, instead, primarily put forward a corporate person that offers accessible, sense-making narratives. This study, through a review of Mobil's “Observations” advertorials from 1975 through 1980,

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reveals how a corporation attempts to build such an influential persona by offering a corporate personality that is an empathetic fellow traveller who is relatable by being believable, and influential by being aspirational. This examination of a significant attempt to convey the corporate persona points to lingering concerns regarding the challenge of realizing and communicating the corporate character in a world that is increasingly complicated by the rise of non-traditional information sources (e.g., social media), and interlocking systemic concerns (e.g., climate change, economic/ecological sustainability).

## 2. The corporate persona and institutional advertising

While there is an abundance of the literature that addresses the legal aspects of corporate personhood (Krannich, 2005; Mayer, 1990; Ripken, 2009) there is a limited amount of public relations scholarship that theorizes the corporate persona. Cheney (1991, 1992) observed that the corporation is an entity composed of many individuals and appears to speak with a collective voice or corporate personality. In its public messaging, the corporation reveals its “nature or character,” in effect presenting itself as a “personal, individual agent,” becoming a “natural person” (Cheney, 1991, p. 5, emphasis in original). Brown, Waltzer, and Waltzer (2001, pp. 28–29) said that one of the chief aims of a corporate public relations campaign is “defining the persona of the organization [and] making the public aware of its identity, interests and activities”. Later, Kerr (2005) noted the importance of the rise of the corporate voice and persona, but largely conceptualized it from within the development of legal precedents. In contrast to such legal framing, scholars (Cable & Vibbert, 1983; St. John and Arnett, 2013; St. John, 2011) have described occasions where the corporate persona is offered up as a heroic figure that attempts to be relatable to citizens by stressing the values it shares with the common person (e.g., the desire for personal and societal progress, the belief in the common sense of the average American, the importance of personal initiative).

Accordingly, the advertorial is a particularly appropriate communication format for assessing how a business entity conveys its corporate persona. Advertorials, where a company or interest purchases space (or time) in a media outlet to articulate its perspective, arose in the early 20th century (Brown et al., 2001; Ewen, 1996; Marchand, 1998). Sethi (1977) found that a particular form of the advertorial – advocacy advertising that was designed to influence public opinion in favor of a corporation’s position on societal issues – arose markedly in the 1970s. Specifically, the advertorial has been identified as form of lobbying that (1) signals the interests and views of a corporation and its stakeholders to policymakers, and (2) attempts to influence the mass public (Kollman, 1998; Newsom, Turk, Kruckeberg, 2004).

Within the literature on advertorials are examinations of Mobil’s use of the approach in papers of national repute – most significantly, the *New York Times* – as a particularly notable use of institutional advertising. Murphree and Aucoin (2010) pointed out that researchers have examined Mobil’s use of the approach across three decades (1970–2000) with an eye toward how the organization was working to insert its corporate speech into the marketplace of ideas. Mobil indicated it had three goals for the use of institutional ads: (1) build a reputation as outspoken and responsible, (2) put forward major issues for public debate, and (3) broaden the spectrum of viewpoints beyond what the major media traditionally offered (Brown & Waltzer, 2005). An analysis of Mobil ads in the *New York Times* from 1985 through 2000 found that Mobil often used a text-heavy version of the format to recount the company’s good deeds, and assert that it was an entity that aligned itself with the values or concerns of the broader public (Brown & Waltzer, 2005). However, this same study found that Mobil’s ads in the *New York Times* were mostly about advocating the company’s position on policy issues (Brown & Waltzer, 2005).

But there is another dimension of institutional advertising that needs increased attention: how the ads attempted to illustrate that the corporation has human-like attributes that make the entity more relatable to the average citizen. Heath and Nelson (1986, p. 81) asserted that Mobil’s advertorials were centered on raising the profile of the corporate entity, “promoting full First Amendment and free enterprise rights for corporate citizens.” Smith and Heath’s (1990) review of Mobil’s advocacy ads found that the company used the long-form op-ed format to portray the company as an authoritative, morally upright citizen that looked out for the public interest. While Mobil’s short-form “Observations” columns have largely been overlooked, other scholars have briefly described Mobil as projecting elements of a persona within the long-form, text-heavy Mobil op-eds. Smith and Heath (1990, p. 53) observed that Mobil used these ads to project a “friendly expert” personality, an entity determined to educate the uninformed. Kerr (2005) also tracked how Mobil conveyed that it was a good citizen that was reasonable and concerned about society. Similarly, Brown and Waltzer (2005, p. 203) noted that the long-form op-eds attempted to show Mobil’s persona as that of the “responsible public citizen.” More recently, Murphree and Aucoin (2010) noted how the Mobil ads were crafted to “build a benevolent, authoritative image” (p. 8), making it clear that Mobil “could be known as a person” (p. 9). And these ads’ portrayal of Mobil tended toward a particular character: the likeable curmudgeon who was feisty, earnest, knowledgeable, and willing to speak out on issues it believed the individual needed to know. Herbert Schmetz, the Mobil public relations executive who oversaw the advocacy advertising, described the approach:

... We wanted to take the offensive without being offensive. Our messages would be urbane and, when possible, good humored; they would not be pompous or bland ... Our ads would ... on occasion, serve to wheedle, cajole, josh, and admonish our readers. (1988, p. 205)

However, in examining primarily Mobil’s long-form issue ads that appeared in such sources as the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine, these works largely ignored another form of advocacy advertising pursued by Mobil – the less text-heavy “Observations” columns that appeared across the country from 1975 until the early 1980s.

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