

Why the creative industry must stop enabling companies driving the climate crisis

By [Stephen Horn](#)

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[Clean Creatives](#), a project for PR and ad professionals who want a safe climate future, recently launched in South Africa with a programme of fossil fuel divestment campaigners, Fossil Free South Africa, and more than 27 local agencies and creatives that have already signed up.



Source: © lightwise [123rf](#) Clean Creatives recently launched in South Africa

Even as the impacts of climate change become increasingly apparent and the alarm bells ring louder, energy companies and politicians continue to plan new fossil fuel projects.

The science is unambiguous – if we want the planet to remain habitable, we cannot afford any new investments in coal, oil and gas. To do so would be “moral and economic madness”, says UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

That major concern aside, it doesn’t even make economic sense to expand the fossil fuel industry – given the comparative cost benefits of modern alternatives.

A windfall for advertising

With this in mind, fossil fuel companies – which are facing an existential crisis of their own – are putting serious money into campaigns that seek to legitimise their actions and win over politicians and the public at large.

This provides a windfall for marketing, advertising and public relations firms, many of whom are benefiting financially from the big 'greenwashing' drive – just as they did when tobacco companies sought to paint their harmful products in a positive light.

In both cases, the creative industry is employed to make destructive corporate actions look neutral or even positive. This, of course, leads to significant negative outcomes for society, and delayed action.

Creative industry starting to push back

But some in the creative industry have had enough, and they're starting to push back.

Many are pushing their firms to join movements such as Clean Creatives, a global coalition of roughly 300 advertisers and public relations agencies who are cutting ties with fossil fuel clients.

These agencies have pledged to decline future contracts with the fossil fuel industry. In giving up short-term opportunities to boost profits, they are ensuring their own long-term sustainability as pressure mounts on companies fanning the flames of climate change.

Those who continue to do the fossil fuel industry's bidding will face ever-increasing scrutiny. Lawsuits are already piling up against fossil fuel companies, and their creative partners in greenwashing will soon become targets themselves.

The Annual F-list programme

With this in mind, Clean Creatives has launched an annual F-List Awards programme, which highlights public relations firms that are the biggest enablers of fossil fuel companies' transgressions.

The awards, which include categories such as "Excellence in Science Fiction", recognise the "most egregious campaigns on behalf of fossil fuel companies".



Advertising industry to tackle the climate emergency

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Cannes on board

At this year's Cannes Lions event in June – the largest gathering in the creative marketing community – a former winner of the Cannes Lions award interrupted the ceremony to return his award and demand a ban on fossil fuel advertising, while activists held protests outside the Palais des Festivals.

After the event, the Creatives for Climate non-profit foundation held a "Greenwash Watch" forum to hold the industry to account for its failures to act with integrity on the climate crisis.

Fed up with greenwashing in the industry

The creative industry must play its part by refusing to assist fossil fuel companies in deceiving the public about the biggest crisis facing all life on earth.

Besides downplaying the magnitude of the crisis, fossil fuel groups are telling consumers that they're embracing

sustainability – even though almost all of their spending is still directed at coal, oil and gas projects.

‘For decades, many in the fossil fuel industry have invested heavily in pseudo-science and public relations – with a false narrative to minimise their responsibility for climate change and undermine ambitious climate policies,’ Guterres said recently.

It’s time for our industry to step up and be a force for good. This is particularly important in a country such as South Africa, which is warming at twice the global average rate – putting food security and livelihoods at risk as droughts and floods become the new norm.

The only path to energy security and a liveable planet is through cheap, clean energy. Thankfully, the creative industry is beginning to wake up to this fact.

Many South African creatives are also fed up with greenwashing in the industry.

Clean Creatives will hold its first event in the country on 12 July, in Cape Town.

We encourage marketing, advertising and public relations professionals to sign our [pledge](#) and join us in our efforts to promote ethical practices in our industry.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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