


My First Inhaler

Peabody Energy — last seen on this blog as the real party in interest whose proposal to mine more coal on Indian land in Arizona had to go back to the drawing board because of this UCLA environmental law clinic case , and immortalized in the John Prine song "Paradise" — has been punked. (I've never actually used that word before; the Forbes article I've linked here actually came up on the first page of a Google search on the word "punked" a few minutes ago.)

The company's new website, coalcares.org, describes its new campaign, Coal Cares:

> Coal Cares is a brand-new initiative from Peabody Energy, the world's largest private-sector coal company, to reach out to American youngsters with asthma and to help them keep their heads high in the face of those who would treat them with less than full dignity. For kids who have no choice but to use an inhaler, **Coal Cares**™ lets them inhale with pride.
>
> Puff-Puff™ inhalers are available free to any family living within 200 miles of a coal plant, and each inhaler comes with a $10 coupon towards the cost of the asthma medication itself.

The website, with lovely pages such as "Kidz Koal Korner," an illustrated selection of kids' inhalers including the "Kids' First Inhaler" and Dora- and Elmo-themed inhalers, and a comment that "Peabody has decided that reducing Asthma-Related Bullying (ARB) is the single most effective way to combat public misperceptions of our industry," is just plausible enough that I have friends that believed it was real.

But it's not. Rather, it's part of a guerilla media campaign against coal by an activist group called Coal is Killing Kids.

Peabody, in a "life imitates art" moment, responded to the campaign this way:

> Peabody's response to the hoax was immediate. "A growing collection of studies demonstrate the correlation between electricity fueled by low-cost

> coal and improvement in health, longevity and quality of life," said a company press release. "The United Nations has linked life expectancy, educational attainment and income with per-capita electricity use, and the World Resources Institute found that for every tenfold increase in per-capita energy use, individuals live 10 years longer."

This is only the latest in a series of guerilla mock-ad campaigns over the past couple of years. For example, in response to Chevron's "We Agree" ad campaign, in which the company attempted to "agree" with critics demanding that energy companies be more socially responsible, an activist group set up a subtle parody. (The New York Times' media blog discussed the details here.) I blogged last year about Polluter Harmony, a mock "dating" website that actually is (rather obviously) a Greenpeace project attacking legislator/lobbyist "relationships." And in a very different context, christwire.org started as a satirical mock-fundamentalist Christian site that was subtle enough to fool the Huffington Post, Rachel Maddow, and others, though today its satire seems rather obvious (and much of it is NSFW and in rather poor taste, such as this article).

This type of campaign is clever, and certainly attracts attention. And this new one is particularly well-done, I think. In the end, I'm not sure whether it will help to turn popular opinion against coal, which — as my co-blogger Holly Doremus has written — has been found to generate life-cycle costs of between $175 and $523 billion annually. And much of this is because of the human deaths and injuries it causes. I appreciate the spirit of this campaign, which is designed to remind people of these costs in an unusual context.