

Betrayed by Business:

A Deeper Look into Volkswagen

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When considering ethical issues and controversies, one thing that is commonly taught is not to repeat history—a German research group was found guilty of carrying out experiments on live subjects in 2015, similar to the German Nazi gassing “experiments”. A string of three companies has been found to have formed the institute that oversaw unethical testing, the company that is feeling most of the backlash is Volkswagen. The car manufacturer who has boasted about having clean engines has now executed the largest greenwashing scandal that has ever been uncovered.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the unethical business practices of multinational corporations that concealed the harmful results of diesel emissions test while advertising a “clean diesel engine”. The group moved to a separate country where it was legal to carry out animal testing on non-human primates, specifically to conduct diesel fuel emissions testing. And when the results of these unethically executed tests came back, the reports were buried in an ad campaign for cleaner engines.

The band of immoral companies includes Volkswagen, BMW, Daimler (the parent organization of Mercedes-Benz), as exposed in an article by Ivana Kottasová from CNN Money (2018). These companies formed the research group called the European Research Group on Environment and Health in the Transport Sector (EUGT), which conducted experiments on non-human primates who were trained to watch cartoons. Health-related experiments are done regularly in America, Kottasová also explains the ban on non-human primate experiments in Germany, which is why EUGT completed their work in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with another group called the Lovelace Respiratory Research Institute. In another article from CNN Money,

Charles Riley (2017) exposed the amount to which Volkswagen is being charged, a whopping \$30 billion dollars, from the manufacturer who brought us Audi, Porsche, SEAT, and Skoda, are now responsible for the terrible quality of the air in Europe. The scandal is more than testing on monkeys, but also lying to the general public on how much toxic gas leaks from beloved “clean” cars.

This is one of the largest, most complicated, systematic, and ethically wrong scandals, and gassing monkeys were just a small part of what Volkswagen had been doing. The “Volkswagen emissions scandal,” what the event is often called, has to do with a gadget that is popular among engine manufacturers: the defeat device for diesel engines. In an illustrated report from the New York Times, authors Gates, Ewing, Russell, and Watkins (2015), shed light on how the defeat device works. Gates and the others explained that the defeat device reduced the amount of nitrous oxide and other particulate matter that was emitted, but only during the car’s testing; once the car was out of testing and on the road, the car would emit up to 40 times more than permitted levels of particulates. Another name one could call this gadget is a “deceive device”, the only purpose of which was to meet the required limitations on pollutants emitted from vehicles, specifically for the United States. Volkswagen and the other manufacturers had already gone too far in producing and advertising their “clean” diesel-run cars, and after the experiments with the monkeys had shown how harmful the noxious gas was, it was already too late to turn back.

While Volkswagen, BMW, and Daimler’s initial focus were to aid in making cars run cleaner, they, in turn, birthed the most deep-seated greenwash scandal that has ever been carried out. As Ferrell, Fraedrich, and Ferrell explain in their textbook *Business Ethics: Ethical Decision*

Making and Cases (2018), greenwashing is misleading stakeholders into thinking they use environmentally friendly practices. Almost a white lie, but instead of white it is “recycled” brown packaging. This scandal is far from a white lie, Volkswagen aided and abetted in polluting the air, adding to the effects of global warming. While also emitting particulates that they themselves proved to be harmful towards humans’ health in their aforementioned gassed monkeys.

In a new documentary-series by Netflix, called *Dirty Money*, show creator Alex Gibney (2018) reveals just how wealthy Volkswagen has become, as they own the world’s largest factory as well as the hippie-heart inside of a lot of loyal and were-to-be future consumers. Ferrell, Fraedrich, and Ferrell would determine Volkswagen as a multinational corporation (MNC), and as such, it is their social responsibility to be an ideal example of an ethical, wholesome company, similar to what they portray in their commercials.

Volkswagen made an initial effort to establish a new source of fuel for automobiles, they moved towards diesel fuel as their choice. A study by the United States Environmental Protection Agency (2016) stated that the emitted particulates of NO_2 and NO_x , nitrogen-based pollutants, can potentially lead to developments of asthma or other respiratory infections, also environmental effects such as acid rain, opaque atmospheres, and other factors that could find its way into the agricultural industries. This report was published shortly after Volkswagen’s group EUGH performed their study on diesel fuel’s relationship to nitrogen-based emissions. EUGH would have found these same results in their monkey experiments, but instead of fixing the problem that they were slowly creating, EUGH covered up and ignored the results of the tests.

In a study done by the UK National Air Quality Strategy (n.d.), a side-by-side study of petrol versus diesel fuel, petrol was found to emit more carbon-based pollutants than diesel, and diesel was proven to be more energy-efficient than petrol. The study did not mention if they were using a diesel engine prepped with a defeat device and also did not cover nitrogen-based particulates, simply explaining that petrol engines produce little to no “particulate matter”, but the conclusion of the study was that diesel is not a greener alternative to petrol, (The UK National Air Quality Strategy, n.d.). For an MNC such as Volkswagen to twist the words of the studies done, suggesting diesel engines are cleaner than petrol engines, is unquestionably fraudulent.

Sullyng the reputation of a beloved company, an image of the hippie lifestyle, is unfortunate; a wholesome brand that was once seen as an environmentally friendly alternative car manufacturer, is now a major contributor to the global warming problem and the development of health problems. Volkswagen, BMW, and Daimler were found guilty of gassing monkeys, using defeat devices, deceiving the general public, and are on the wrong end of a 30 billion dollar scandal. They are not defending themselves, but rather, apologizing to the entire Earth for harming the atmosphere, their consumers, and the “secondhand smokers” of the poisonous gases that were unknowingly emitted by drivers of “clean diesel” vehicles.

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