

Today's debate: Public service ads

Ad Council sacrifices credibility to politics

Our view:

'Non-partisan' ad campaign helps fund partisan attacks.

When a revered charity dupes the public once, it can be chalked up as a mistake. But when the charity persists in the deception, there's no getting around the fact that it's intentional.

And now that the Advertising Council has decided to renew its controversial fundraising support for partisan environmental groups, the conclusion is inescapable: In spite of its reputation for high-quality public-service ad campaigns, the Ad Council's standards for political neutrality are situational, at best. Consequently, TV stations and newspapers that donate air time and ad space to the Ad Council (among them USA TODAY) have no guarantee their charitable efforts won't be used for partisan causes.

To most, the Ad Council is best known for the good works it advances. In 1972, the council encouraged Americans to give to the United Negro College Fund through ads declaring, "A mind is a terrible thing to waste."

In 1944, the Ad Council was behind the creation of Smokey Bear to help prevent forest fires. And almost 40 years later, it introduced McGruff the Crime Dog, to raise children's awareness of crime issues. All worthy causes that met the council's strict standards for non-partisanship.

For the past 10 years, though, the Ad Council also has been raising money for environmental and allied political groups with controversial agendas that spread beyond the environment — including support for campaign-finance reform, opposition to bankruptcy legislation and advocacy of civil disobedience to fight the deployment of a national missile defense.

In March, the Ad Council announced it would continue this fundraising through a series of new ads eliciting donations for Earth Share, an umbrella organization for 44 environmental groups. Some of that money is flowing into partisan politics.

Within weeks of the Ad Council's decision, 14 environmental groups that receive some of the money announced how they'll be spending a portion of their donations on a "multimillion-dollar" series of ads attacking the Bush administration's environmental policies.



Pointed message: Scene from ad attacking the Bush administration paid for by Earth Share members.

Brought to you by Smokey Bear
The Advertising Council contends its public-service ads are "non-partisan." But its Earth Share campaign raises money for the following groups involved in politics, among others:

- ▶ **American Rivers:** Last month it, along with 11 other groups that are members of Earth Share, including the Center for Marine Conservation and the National Audubon Society, ran ads in nine states attacking the Bush administration.

- ▶ **Union of Concerned Scientists:** The UCS brags that its activities include "lobbying" on specific legislation before Congress. Its agenda extends beyond popular environmental issues to include such issues as restricting biotechnology and fighting plans for a national missile defense.

- ▶ **U.S. Public Interest Research Group:** The PIIG distributes congressional scorecards similar to the Christian Coalition's voter guides.

- ▶ **Sierra Club:** The Sierra Club has played an increasingly active role in elections in recent years," says its Web site. This spring, the organization ran ads attacking senators from Oregon, New Hampshire and Arkansas for their positions on campaign-finance reform.

- ▶ **Natural Resources Defense Council:** This year, the NRDC has already spent a half-million dollars on cable TV ads in 20 markets urging people to contact Congress and the White House to oppose new oil drilling in an Alaska wildlife refuge.

- ▶ **Friends of the Earth:** During last year's primary, Friends of the Earth endorsed Bill Bradley against Al Gore, then backed Gore against Bush.

SOURCE: USA TODAY research

Their political stand is no surprise. During last fall's presidential elections, many of the same groups were heavily involved in politics, making endorsements, running phone banks and launching attack ads.

The surprise is the Ad Council's insistence that such activities don't violate its standards requiring the public-service campaigns it supports to be "non-partisan." "Political advocacy groups," the council's application criteria note, are "not eligible."

Most of the groups under Earth Share's membership umbrella are laudable, using their portion of the \$60 million the group has collected since 1991 to clean up parks and wilderness areas, fund scientific research and purchase the development rights of farms and watersheds.

But a third of the groups funded by Earth Share have clear political agendas and are more involved in Washington political battles than actually improving the environment. Several regularly run political ads or employ lobbyists, while still others endorse candidates for federal office and distribute campaign scorecards just as the National Rifle Association and the Christian Coalition do.

Asked eight months ago about the violation of its standards, the Ad Council dismissed the issue as irrelevant since Earth Share funds only the charitable branches of the political groups. That's a thin excuse: The groups' charitable affiliates are almost always on the same address by the same person and can spend much of their money supporting political activism.

If the leaders of the Ad Council learned from their mistakes, they would have quietly let the Earth Share campaign lapse. Instead, they ignored their own rules. As a result, residents of at least nine states from New Mexico to New Hampshire are being treated to a new round of attack ads targeting the Bush administration.

The Ad Council really has only one asset of value: credibility. That's the tool that encourages corporations to make huge donations of ad space, and it's the reason that millions of Americans act on the messages they hear in Ad Council ads.

Too bad the Ad Council doesn't seem to care. Credibility is a terrible thing to waste.

Campaigns meet criteria

influence legislation. All campaigns, including Earth Share, are thoroughly vetted by our proposals committee, which is made up of industry leaders from advertising, media, business and philanthropy.

Having carefully reviewed our selection criteria, we firmly maintain our commitment to Earth Share. As a campaign sponsor, Earth Share not only meets all of our criteria, but also maintains its own strict criteria for the groups that it represents.

Contrary to USA TODAY's assertion, most of Earth Share's members do not engage in legislative politics. Still, while issues of environmental policy sometimes enter into the political arena, the environment itself is a concern all Americans share, regardless of political affiliation.

And while it may be true that some of our campaign sponsors are involved in legislative activities, Ad Council campaigns address issues only. We do not advocate nor do we condemn gun ownership; we promote safe gun storage. We do not advocate nor do we condemn lowering the legal blood-alcohol limit; we encourage friends to prevent friends from driving drunk.

As I have previously written, the Ad Council gives national voice to issues that might otherwise go unheard. To politicize those issues would be to jeopardize our effectiveness, thus undermining the Ad Council's very foundation.

Our mission is, and continues to be, a non-political one.

Peggy Conlon is president and CEO of the Advertising Council.

Opposing view:

Council's ads are carefully screened for political bias.

By Peggy Conlon

For the second time, USA TODAY has taken issue with our support of a public-service advertising campaign for Earth Share. Since creating the category of public-service advertising (PSAs) in 1942, the Ad Council has consistently produced timely, compelling and politically unbiased messages — solely in the spirit of improving American life.

Ad Council PSAs are not, nor have they ever been, political in nature. For 59 years, our campaigns have raised awareness, inspired individuals to action and saved lives. Decade after decade, the Ad Council has served as a champion for various environmental issues.

Our long partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and Smokey Bear has saved millions of acres of woodland. Our work for Keep America Beautiful, featuring Iron Eyes Cody as "The Crying Indian," still remains a powerful symbol of the fight against pollution. And our alliance with Environmental Defense has in large part contributed to the rapid adoption of community curbside-recycling programs nationwide.

Every year, we receive hundreds of inquiries from those wishing to become an Ad Council campaign. The few campaigns that are accepted must fit strict, established criteria. Above all else, the issue we take on must be non-commercial, non-demonstrational, non-politically partisan and not designed to

Revisiting arsenic policy a mistake, EPA chief says

'If I'd been smart ... I would've let the courts decide'

By Traci Watson
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Environmental Protection Agency head Christie Whitman says she made a strategic mistake in reconsidering a strict federal limit on arsenic levels in drinking water.

Her announcement in March that the EPA would take a second look at a new arsenic standard set by the Clinton administration was not bad policy, Whitman says, but it was naive politics.

"Politically, if I'd been smart, I would've never changed it. I never would've gone back. I would've let the courts decide," Whitman said in an interview. "We were going to be sued anyway by the Western states and a bunch of water companies, and I should've just left it there."

Whitman said she was unprepared for the fallout of her decision on the arsenic limit, which prompted outrage from environmental groups and jokes on late-night television.

Arsenic, which is thought to cause cancer, is found naturally in some kinds of rock and can leach into groundwater through erosion or mining. High arsenic concentrations are found mostly in the drinking water of Western cities, such as Albuquerque.

For decades, the U.S. limit of the chemical in drinking water stood at 50 parts per billion. In 1999, the National Academy of Sciences said that limit needed to be lowered as soon as possible. One of the last acts by the Clinton administration in January was to cut the arsenic limit to 10 parts per billion.

Mining groups, many water companies and some Western lawmakers immediately protested. They said the cost to lower the limit would be devastating and the science was unproved. Several months later, Whitman agreed to re-examine setting the limit.

Her decision came the same day the Bush administration said it would also suspend new limits on



By Al Grillo, AP

Whitman: "Governors do not like to let courts make policy. Governors like to make policy."

mining. A week earlier, the president had backed off a campaign pledge to cut global-warming emissions from power plants.

The string of events helped portray Bush as weak on public-health issues and the environment, political analysts said.

Analysts said Whitman's arsenic decision played a prime role in giving the administration an image problem.

"Some well-known poison obviously gets people's attention in a way that another chemical would not," Republican pollster Whit Ayres said.

Debbie Sease, legislative director of the Sierra Club, characterized Whitman's decision as "a terrible political mistake" that helped focus the public's attention on Bush's environmental policies. "Arsenic ... is not complicated. It's just scary and bad," Sease said.

In response to the arsenic uproar, both the House and Senate approved measures calling for tougher arsenic limits. That makes it likely Congress will send Bush an arsenic-limiting provision, probably attached to a spending bill.

If that happens, Whitman said, she's not sure she'd advise a presi-

States, cities using boutique blends

Some of the states and metropolitan areas where "boutique blends" of gasoline are required to lower air pollution. (Story, 1A)

- ▶ California
- ▶ Minnesota
- ▶ Albuquerque
- ▶ Atlanta
- ▶ Birmingham, Ala.
- ▶ Boston
- ▶ Charlotte, N.C.
- ▶ Chicago
- ▶ Cincinnati
- ▶ Denver
- ▶ Houston
- ▶ Kansas City, Mo. and Kan.
- ▶ Las Vegas
- ▶ Miami
- ▶ Missoula, Mont.
- ▶ Nashville
- ▶ New York City
- ▶ Norfolk, Va.
- ▶ Philadelphia
- ▶ Phoenix
- ▶ Pittsburgh
- ▶ Portland, Ore.
- ▶ St. Louis
- ▶ Salt Lake City
- ▶ Seattle
- ▶ Tulsa

dential veto, because of the possible consequences of turning down a spending bill.

Whitman, who was governor of New Jersey before taking the helm at the EPA, said she's still not likely to let the courts settle future policy decisions, despite the political fallout from her move to suspend the limit on arsenic.

Being a governor, Whitman said, gave her the "bad habit" of wanting to make her own decisions.

"Governors do not like to let courts make policy," she said. "Governors like to make policy."

Asked about global warming and Bush's rejection of the Kyoto Protocol, which has been accepted by 180 nations, Whitman said the administration might never offer a single substitute plan.

"At this point, I'd hesitate to even call it a plan," Whitman said. "It may be a series of initiatives and undertakings."