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OUR RESPONSE

We believe the ad “Don’t Throw Anything Away. There is No Away” is a creative way of drawing attention to the problem of waste disposal - and of making everyone who sees it feel they can play a part in finding solutions to such problems in the energy field. It was not an isolated advertising piece. It is part of a series in our Real Energy campaign, which aims at opening a debate about choices, issues and solutions for all parties involved in meeting the energy challenge.

The ad intends to raise awareness about environmental consequences of the production and use of energy. Its image is drawn in a playful design, showing a factory with flowers instead of smoke emitting from the chimneys. The headline reads “Don’t Throw Anything Away. There is No Away”. The ad text says: “If only we had a magic bin that we could throw stuff in and make it disappear forever. What we can do is find creative ways to recycle. We use our waste CO₂ to grow flowers. And our waste sulphur to make super strong concrete. Real energy solutions for the real world. www.shell.com/realenergy”

Parallel complaints were filed with advertising standards authorities in the UK, The Netherlands, Belgium and Germany, saying the ad could “mislead consumers regarding the environmental aspects of the products being advertised and the advertiser’s contribution to maintaining and promoting a clean and safe environment in general”.

We do not believe the ad could mislead a reasonable reader, and our responses to the advertising authorities said so. So, what happened to the complaints?

The advertising standards authorities in Germany and Belgium threw them out. The Dutch and UK authorities partly rejected the complaints, but also said that our statements on our use of carbon dioxide (CO₂) to grow flowers and sulphur to make extra-strong concrete did not clearly explain that this did not cover all the CO₂ and sulphur we produce. We didn’t agree with this ruling, but accepted it. The UK authority, ASA, also said the image itself could not be regarded as misleading as it was “conceptual and fanciful”.

The ruling of the Belgian advertising authority said it had “established that the advertisement does not contain any absolute assertions or representations.” It continued: “The clouds of flowers emerging from factory chimneys are clearly metaphorical. They will also be perceived in that sense, in the Jury’s view, by the average consumer: every consumer knows that the smoke coming out of factory chimneys is not now suddenly harmless for the environment. This image straightaway invites one to read the text underneath, which then brings clarification: “If only we had a magic bin that we could throw stuff in and make it disappear forever. What we can do is find creative ways to recycle. We use our waste CO2 to grow flowers. And our waste sulphur to make super strong concrete. Real energy solutions for the real world. www.shell.com/realenergy”

It continues: “the first sentence (if only we had a magic bin...) embodies the expression of a wish. In no way is this any affirmation that Shell does have a magic solution to hand. On the contrary, this sentence points out that there is no magic solution. Subsequently (what we can do...) the reader is informed about Shell’s efforts (CO2 recycling and sulphur recycling), followed by a website address.”

And it concludes: “In no way does the text (including the slogan) indicate that Shell’s activities have no consequences for the environment, but solely states what efforts Shell is taking to benefit the environment.”

The world needs more energy and less CO2. This is a big challenge. Along with others, we are trying to find responsible solutions,. Our communications, like the ad campaign, talks about what we do, aiming for awareness building. Most people understand that, and see there is a role here for producers and users of energy alike, with governments needing to establish sensible frameworks.