



# How the World's Biggest PR Firm Helps Promote Climate Change Denial

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When a recent *Guardian* survey asked top public relations firms if they would refuse to represent organizations that denied climate change, the response was encouraging: ten of the largest said they would. Decidedly less inspiring was the response of the world's single biggest PR company, Edelman, which said it would not rule out helping corporations spread messages of climate change denial.

This shouldn't be too surprising, seeing as how it's already doing precisely that. A lot. The company is not just one of the PR world's premier "greenwashers," it actively assists groups that specifically set out to distort the public's understanding of climate change.

Edelman is "the largest PR firm in the world," according to Holmes' 2014 World Report, and "has now held the number one spot for the past four years." It raked in \$741 million in revenues last year. A decent chunk of that comes from keeping the American Petroleum Institute, the oil industry's chief trade association and lobbying group, as one of its top clients. According to documents obtained by the Investigative Fund this year, API retained Edelman for \$52 million.

Most of that cash was dedicated to helping the oil industry lobby the federal government to roll back regulations and to approve new emissions-heavy fossil fuel projects. "On behalf of API, Edelman managed multiple websites and online advertising efforts asking officials to approve the Keystone XL pipeline, support tax deductions for the oil industry and expand access for drilling on public lands," the Fund noted.

API's public materials are slippery on the climate issue; its press releases routinely misrepresent climate science while striving to avoid outright denial that might get it skewered. In "An Overview of the Climate Change Issue from the US Oil and Natural Gas Industry," API writes that "possible man-made warming is uncertain as the extent and timing of potential impacts," though it admits emissions "may be... enhancing the natural greenhouse effect."

That's technically not entirely false, but it's contextually misleading. It's an expert bit of PR semantics—perhaps obtained from Edelman—that drastically downplays the actual risks of

climate change. It's climate change denial. A huge majority of scientists—97 percent of them—agree that manmade emissions *are* causing climate change. Period. But its public-facing statements are nothing compared to the superstructure of climate obfuscation API enables.

In a 2012 report, the liberal watchdog group Media Matters showed that API was at the heart of what it called the "climate denial machine." API funds a network of conservative think tanks and public climate skeptics who help disseminate the scientifically invalid view that climate change is not caused by fossil fuels and human activity, presumably at Edelman's encouragement, or at least its implicit consent.

API has given money to the Cato Institute, which promotes the work of Patrick Michaels, one of the most influential American climate skeptics—his work has been roundly criticized, and is routinely debunked by his fellow scientists. Yet, thanks in part to API backing, Michaels promulgates his counterfactual take on news outlets, in policy briefings, even at Congressional hearings.

Worse is Steve Milloy, a lawyer and former tobacco industry consultant, who "was hired by the American Petroleum Institute to develop a PR strategy to downplay the threat of climate change," according to Media Matters. API cash also flows into the coffers of the personnel at the American Tradition Institute and the Competitive Enterprise Institute, two organizations that work to promote the view that climate change hasn't been scientifically proven to be a threat.

I can't say if or how Edelman influences or advises those public relations plays, as the company failed to respond to multiple requests for comment for this story. But API undoubtedly sows climate denial—which is enough for the world's other top firms to say they'd back off.

"We would not knowingly partner with a client who denies the existence of climate change," said Rhian Rotz, spokesman for WE, another major PR company that participated in the *Guardian* survey.

Neither would Weber Shandwick, which is the second largest PR firm in the world. "We would not support a campaign that denies the existence and the threat posed by climate change, or efforts to obstruct regulations cutting greenhouse gas emissions and/or renewable energy standards," spokeswoman Michelle Selesky said.

Apparently, Edelman has no such qualms.

But API isn't the only polluting body Edelman flacks for. Edelman, which according to its own list of accomplishments, "created environmental PR with StarKist Dolphin-Safe Tuna" (which isn't, by the way), has a rich history of greenwashing and working with companies that promote climate change denial. It attracted the ire of climate activists for helping to advocate a major UK coal plant operated by energy company E.On. "Edelman is spinning the climate out control," they said.

Among its primary tactics, as noted by Corporate Watch, is the use of third-party front groups—fake organizations built expressly to be used as a public relations tool. One of its newest

creations is the Northwest Alliance for Jobs and Exports, an astroturf group dedicated to opening coal export terminals in Washington and Oregon. Part of the group's line is, naturally, that exporting American coal to China is good for the planet.

Lauri Hennessey, an Edelman vice president, told the *Seattle Times* that because American coal is less dense than Chinese coal, it's a net gain—and people are going to burn coal no matter what, so it might as well be American. “The more you dig into the whole complicated issue, I feel very, very proud about being involved,” she said.

But Edelman's most famous use of astroturf groups on the energy front is probably its effort to stage a series of television ads with API starring "REAL PEOPLE not actors" sharing their opinions on the oil industry. It went awry when they were forced to dismiss a clean energy advocate who went on camera and said he wanted clean jobs.

The Investigative Fund alleges that some of Edelman's pro-oil and gas projects are so blatantly politically targeted that it should be registered as a lobbying group—and that by not doing so, it's breaking the law.

"Despite [its] seemingly obvious lobbying activity, Edelman has not registered as a lobbying firm since 2006. The so-called 'grassroots advocacy' that the firm specializes in falls outside the statutory definition in the Lobbying Disclosure Act," the Fund wrote in its report.

In other words, Edelman is so aggressive in blurring the lines with its promotion of fossil fuel companies, it may be engaging in illegal behavior.

Clearly, this is not the industry standard. The rest of the world's top PR companies can disavow climate change denial, and many working in the industry want no part of such work.

"I think there is a moral obligation for all of us to fight the causes of climate change," Silvio Marcacci, a PR professional who runs his own shop, Marcacci Communications, told me. "And I personally would not be able to work at a firm that did climate denier or fossil fuel work. Because this is a thing that we all have to work on together."

"Other people might have their own ethics," he added.

According to an anonymous tipster who worked at the company in 2008, part of Edelman's 'media training' includes the following instruction: "Sometimes, you just have to stand up there and lie. Make the audience or the reporter believe that everything is ok."

That's exactly, it seems, what they're doing with climate change.