



MOBIL CHEMICAL CORPORATION (ABSTRACT)

For more than a decade, WRI's Sustainable Enterprise Program (SEP) has harnessed the power of business to create profitable solutions to environment and development challenges. BELL, a project of SEP, is focused on working with managers and academics to make companies more competitive by approaching social and environmental challenges as unmet market needs that provide business growth opportunities through entrepreneurship, innovation, and organizational change.

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“Mobil has concluded that biodegradable plastics will not help solve the solid waste problem. We do, however, see that there are some short-term public relations gains in switching to a photodegradable plastic grocery sack or consumer trash bag, or even a biodegradable bag of each type. And it’s that public relations value that has to be considered as opposed to real solutions to the problem.” – Robert Barrett, spokesman for Mobil Chemical Company, 1988.

In June of 1989, Mobil Chemical Company introduced a degradable line of *Hefty* garbage bags. One year later Mobil Chemical was sued by the attorneys general in seven different states, as well as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), on charges of deceptive advertising and consumer fraud. The separate lawsuits charged that Mobil misled the public with false advertising claims that its *Hefty* brand garbage bags were “degradable”, eventually forcing them to pull the degradable bags from the product line.

The states involved in the suits included Minnesota, California, New York, Massachusetts, Washington, Wisconsin, and Texas. According to the attorneys general, the problem with *Hefty* ‘s claims was that while the plastic bags may degrade within months of exposure to direct sunlight, most trash bags get buried in landfills where exposure to sunlight is limited, so degradation actually takes many years. Consumers were being misled into thinking they were acting favorably towards the

environment if they purchased the product, when in fact their actions might cause greater environmental damage. Even if the bags did degrade after being buried in landfills, they might release toxic substances that could leach into the groundwater.

The key issue in this case and a number of other similar lawsuits, according to the attorneys general, was that numerous terms were being used in public advertisements insinuating that products were good for the environment, when there was no scientific proof to back up those claims. In some cases, the advertisements were blatantly false. Terms like “recyclable”, “recycled”, “environmentally friendly”, and “ozone friendly” were being used indiscriminately without any basis for the consumer to know exactly what was meant. The attorneys general were determined to hold manufacturers responsible for the accuracy and validity of their claims.

Minnesota Attorney General Hubert Humphrey III described the *Hefty* case as such:

“Unfortunately, Mobil’s advertising claims break down faster than their garbage bags. We simply cannot tolerate this kind of exploitation of consumers or the environment. One of the most exciting trends of the past year is that consumers want to buy products that are good for the environment. But if we allow advertisers to make deceptive claims, consumers may get so confused and frustrated that they stop taking the environment into account when they go shopping.”¹

¹ Press Release, State of Minnesota Office of the Attorney General, June 12, 1990.