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## Bogusky Would Have to Burn Bridges to Really Become the Next Ralph Nader

The Problem Isn't in the Creative Guru's Reinvention but How Far He'll Have to Take It

by [Matthew Creamer](#)  
Published: November 01, 2010

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**Matthew Creamer**

One of my creative director contacts had a not terribly nuanced reaction to the news last week that Alex Bogusky, probably the best-known adman of the 21st century, is reinventing himself as a consumer advocate. "What a hypocrite," this usually level-headed fellow spat. "He should give back all the money he's made on advertising."

I don't agree. The idea that, in the name of consistency, one is locked into a career is a fundamentally depressing worldview. Reinvention should be allowed. And, anyway, Mr. Bogusky has always been concerned with social causes. Even while selling burgers and Jettas, the firm he founded was working on an innovative anti-smoking campaign, among other causes.

We shouldn't have an issue with Mr. Bogusky's post-advertising, pro-consumer life. The problem is with the way he's unfurling it. His general dissatisfaction with working in an agency business that required him to market brands like Burger King and Domino's -- whose artery-clogging, animal-butchered product lines offend his values -- has been clear for some time. It was implied by his 2008 book, "The Nine-Inch Diet," and made more explicit when he left MDC Partners this summer. But until last week it was unclear what shape the post-MDC chapter would take. Would he start a socially-conscious agency? Hook up with a venture fund? Join up with the monks he had visit him in Boulder?

And I would argue that after Tuesday's

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THE NEXT NADER? Bogusky is now pushing for a new consumer bill of rights -- and selling T-shirts.

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when it comes to consumer advocacy and has been since the 1960s, when he got into the game by launching a full-frontal attack on automakers' woeful safety record.

His "Unsafe At Any Speed" is a landmark of policy-shaping investigative journalism that inspired a generation of young idealists to head to D.C. to unleash hell on irresponsible corporations. Those guys had an awesome name that I think Alex would like -- Nader's Raiders. When he was done with Detroit, he turned to the environment, anti-nuke movement and other causes. Public Citizen, the organization he founded, has more than 140,000 members. Mr. Nader, who has a face for telegraph, became an honest-to-God celebrity along the way, even hosting "Saturday Night Live" in 1977.

Mr. Bogusky has Nader beaten on looks and charisma by an electric-vehicle-traversed mile. Money, too, since Mr. Nader lives on \$25,000 a year, reportedly.

Communications-wise, Mr. Bogusky has the platform that someone who's an ad business microcelebrity has: 37,000 Twitter followers, a web TV show, a blog, a diet book that ranks somewhere around 328,000 in the Amazon.com sales charts. Projects he backs are a cool bike-sharing program, a company that makes cars more environmentally friendly, and a nut butter.

I'll allow Nader to decide whether he stacks up to Mr. Nader; I would still say it's not inconceivable that one day we'll be talking fondly about a movement he's created, Bogusky's Muskies or some such.

I think for him to get to that point where he has influence beyond the Fast Company set he has to do something he hasn't really done or shown the willingness: sell out the ad business. You know, blow some whistles or something.

What really sets Mr. Bogusky apart from other rich, accomplished

announcement on the Fearless website, it's still pretty murky.

Here's what we know. Mr. Bogusky wants a bill of rights for consumers, based on a 1962 plan from President Kennedy that didn't go anywhere, to be

updated through the magic of crowdsourcing and then signed by all corporations. That's right, all of them. To help the cause, he's selling T-shirts made in American Apparel's downtown L.A. factory, a socially responsible source -- if lining the pervy Dov Charney's pockets can be said to be responsible. And that's about it.

Along the way, Mr. Bogusky has compared himself to Ralph Nader, which, at the risk of being rude, is not just laughable. It's ROTFLable. Mr. Nader may at this late date come off as an election-ruining clown in a flammable suit and shoes from Sears, but he's a baller



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middle-aged guys with a yen for bikes and tofu is his inside knowledge. He knows how the chicken fries are made, how the subservient chicken is actually pulling our strings. He must have a million secrets about the fun-with-chemistry! horror shows that go on in those companies that are turning Americans into lethargic glops. Sure, a diet book is nice, but will he ever tell all about how consumers really get manipulated, and tell it from the perspective of someone who was in the inside at the top of his game?

Right now, the revolution feels corporatized. Among the offerings listed on the Fearless Revolution website is "Consulting": "We help big companies and titans of industry uncover the consumer advocate hiding inside the layers of corporate BS." And "Design": "Advocacy can be designed. From business models to the products themselves, it's all design. If you agree, we might be just the special sauce you've been looking for."

Then there's Boulder porn, a few pics of tanned, lean smarties tapping on Macbooks and, steamiest of all, the Fearless Cottage, a fetish object for sustainable-design enthusiasts. There's a blog and the video interviews, which are legitimately interesting if you like over-long chats with experts on things like advertising to children and bicycle safety.

That's all fine, but it doesn't feel like the stuff of insurgency or a rewrite of Naderism for a world where consumers are more empowered than they used to be. It feels like an über-cool blend of corporate social responsibility, something PR types have been yammering about for years.

Maybe rather than Ralph Nader, Mr. Bogusky should really be thinking of himself as a latter day Jeffrey Wigand. You may recall that name from a movie called "The Insider," in which the real-life researcher at Brown & Williamson was played by a gray-haired Russell Crowe. Wigand took evidence that Big Tobacco knew about its products extreme health risks to "60 Minutes," whose craggy journo, in an act of extreme wussiness, first scuttled and then aired a gelded version of the story.

Mr. Bogusky wondered whether "a former advertising executive is allowed to become a consumer advocate, but I plan to give it a shot. This is still America after all."

History -- and by history I mean "Mad Men," where Emerson Foote appeared at a footnote in an episode where Don Draper turned the appearance of conscience into a marketing vehicle -- tells us it is. Mr. Foote, a mid-century ad exec, turned against his longtime clients in the tobacco industry.

To speak out against tobacco's dangers, Foote had to sacrifice his high-paying advertising career in a day when things like that weren't really done. Once the head of major agency offices, he ended up having to seek a job by taking out a full-page ad in this magazine in 1965. Mr. Wigand lost his marriage, career, received death threats and, while sitting in a paranoid stupor, had a hotel room melt on him Salvador Dali-style (in the movie version). Mr. Nader was the victim of a snooping operation by General Motors that includes a parade of babes that tried to get him into compromising positions.

To be sure, Mr. Bogusky is making sacrifices of his own. As self-described creative insurgent, he presumably will not be making millions of dollars a year, as he did for some years at MDC. And he has left behind the industry where he is truly and rightfully famous.

But there's something missing. I get that he's trying to change companies from within, but it's difficult to see that as advocacy in

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the vein of a Nader. Truly rejecting and taking on corporate structures that have welcomed you in, trusted you and paid you very, very well is very, very hard. But it's also the way to be truly fearless.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Matthew Creamer** is an editor at large for Advertising Age.

5 Comments

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By jmsptrck101 | Chicago, IL [November 1, 2010 10:56:07 am](#):

Perhaps, if he wants to become the next Ralph Nader, his first effort out of the gate should be more accurate than the case which made Nader famous. What's usually overlooked about the case Nader made when he took on GM and the Corvair in his book 'Unsafe At Any Speed' is the inaccuracy of many of his claims.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) conducted tests in 1971 studying the 1963 Corvair and four contemporary cars and found "the 1960-63 Corvair compares favorably with contemporary vehicles used in the tests...the handling and stability performance of the 1960-63 Corvair does not result in an abnormal potential for loss of control or rollover, and it is at least as good as the performance of some contemporary vehicles both foreign and domestic."

So if Alex does become a consumer advocate, I hope he makes his name on accurate findings, not just emotional calls for change.

+1

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By rcsulli33 | Mobile, AL [November 1, 2010 09:29:12 am](#):

Alex was very nice to me on a number of occasions, but I must say his resignation/exit/whatever and latest incarnation perplexes.

There's a make-it-up-as-we-go charm to his effort. But to blast the guy as hypocritical seems harsh. Bored is probably more accurate.

Regardless, it'll be interesting to see where this goes. Good luck.

Rich Sullivan  
Red Square Agency  
<http://twitter.com/redsquareagency>

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By MICHAEL | LAKE OSWEGO, OR [November 1, 2010 12:32:59 pm](#):

Now, this is a bulls-eye! "ROTFLable." That's exactly right. Nader spurred creation of the NHTSA (which has itself proven to be rather less important than it seemed at the moment of its birth).

Bogusky peddles greenwash:

<http://www.deathbycar.info/2010/10/surrender-activism/>

Nice column, MC!

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By WorkAvoidanceLog | Los Angeles, CA [November 1, 2010 03:19:09 pm](#):

Matthew, regardless of anyone's view of Mr Bogusky's mid-life career shift, I think we can all agree that you score an "A" for

"awesome" with this turn of the stiletto:

"Mr Nader, who has a face for telegraph..."

That one'll have me smiling all day.

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By tsmuse | Seattle, WA [November 1, 2010 05:55:48 pm](#):

In the age of Facebook like = activism, Bogusky's view of the next Nader isn't that surprising. As a culture, we've become too self-centered to really sacrifice for a cause we believe in. Need examples? Want to help cure aids, go buy a t-shirt at the Gap or a red iPod. Breast cancer? Go buy some pink ribbon KFC. Really mad about something going down in DC? Sign an online petition and join a Facebook group.

With the bar set this low, consulting as a "user advocate" and selling t-shirts to support your cause sail over as Nader-esq, sad as it may be. Bogusky is a very smart dude, I'm sure if he really took up the fight the way Nader did he could change the world. But where's the money in that?

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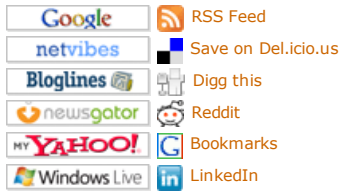
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