Fine Line between Greed Groundbreaking Discovery

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By CHRIS FOX, Associate Editor, *Product Design & Development* (*PD&D*)

Since news broke of Apple's plans to build a fuel cell power plant in North Carolina, two major issues have been stirring for me. One issue is a liberal, anti-corporate piece of my conscience that roots for the little guy and dislikes companies that are too big. The other part of my mind hopes and plans for a fertile and clean future.

First, the bad news.

As admirable and American Dream-esque as Apple's rise has been since 1976, they have become a major corporation, the world's largest tech company. Apple used to be the little guy fighting against the big Microsoft monopoly bully and just trying to be heard amongst the naysayers. Now, Apple is one of the fastest growing corporations on the market, with no feasible end in sight, as Steve Jobs had things planned some three to five years in advance.

So what's the big deal? Have you seen the price of gas lately? This is what happens when large corporations get involved in things that we demand or desperately want. They corner the market and rack up the price. It's good business, but it means the rest of us end up paying for high-end luxuries and vast workforces that CEOs enjoy. In my opinion, this gives the folks with too much money far too much power.

They may create jobs and have a hand in developing our infrastructure, but it could come at the cost of pushing workforce wages lower, or worse, offshoring well-paying jobs, while the mega-corporation gains ever growing profits. Energy, specifically, is a sensitive market. We all require vast amounts of energy to work,

play and live. When companies that are only interested in their bottom line take control of something we absolutely need, they essentially control our lives. As with oil, companies can use every available excuse to raise prices; war, a refinery fire in Sweden, fear of Nigerian spies, geopolitical worries, the list goes on and on.

It is potentially dangerous to have any corporation (be it Apple, BP, Goldman Sachs or Facebook) dipping their hands into the pool of selling energy. Open commerce is the cornerstone of this country, but it is no longer open when a few fat cats control what we need and for how much. Unfortunately, this is the situation we find ourselves currently in with the oil, coal and natural gas industries, so the real issue is how much longer we can bear this kind of monopoly system for our needs?

Now, the good news.

Apple is creating a power plant! This is good news because Apple is an extremely innovative company, and they have a lot of money to throw around. This idea is walking the thin line between the above scenarios and a truly revolutionary breakthrough.

The plan that Apple brought to the NC Utilities Commission is for permission to build a fuel cell energy project located on the same complex that will host a 20-megawatt solar farm. The fuel cell will be the nation’s largest private fuel cell energy project and will be a silent power plant that will generate electricity from hydrogen. To put it lightly, this could be the next big step in a new energy revolution.

Other companies have toyed with furthering power generation, but similar projects have often been abandoned due to sheer cost of production issues. People already complain about the price of energy, so it can be expected to be unsuccessful if prices go higher. People are often willing to pay more to go green, but there is always a threshold where the squawking starts, and this threshold is often significantly lower than companies will push their profit margins. This shows little incentive for a company, as even higher price hikes would be required to make any sort of profit beyond the increased production costs. Basically, it is bad business.

This is where Apples massive bank roll makes them an ideal company for such a task. They can afford to pound out the details while making little to no profit, which will, in turn, make an energy generation process of this kind cheaper when it hits the open market. We need to have companies (especially those with money) that are willing to tinker with their cash. Otherwise, expensive technology (even if it is better) will only reach the masses when all other forms have been destroyed or exhausted.

Apple is also fit to this task because of their armies of innovative developers, inventors, and just plain smart people. In fact, this is arguably the biggest reason Apple is fit to take on such a task. They know how to hire the right people and keep them. Apple is often credited with having one of the smartest workforces around; why not add a few energy experts and chemical engineers to the mix?

My fingers are crossed that Apple finds a way to make cheap and efficient energy

from hydrogen, and that they don't get terribly greedy along the way. There is a truly fine line between innovation and corruption, I just hope they know what they are doing.

What's your take? Please feel free to email Fox at chris.fox@advantagemedia.com *[1] or leave a comment below!*

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