

Greenwashing: New Report Offers Tips for Staying Out of Trouble

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Greenwashing is telling “little green lies.” Or, according to the Seven Sins of Greenwashing, it is “the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service.”

A new report Understanding and Preventing Greenwash: A Business Guide from Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) and Futerra Sustainability Communications outlines key environmental marketing mistakes and strategies to avoid greenwashing. The report can be downloaded from the BSR or Futerra web sites.

Ten signs of greenwashing

The ten signs of greenwash overlap with the Seven Sins of Greenwashing from TerraChoice:

1. Fluffy language. Words or terms with no clear meaning (e.g. “eco-friendly”).
2. Green product vs. dirty company. Such as efficient light bulbs made in a factory that pollutes rivers.
3. Suggestive pictures. Green images that indicate a (unjustified) green impact (e.g. flowers blooming from exhaust pipes).
4. Irrelevant claims. Emphasizing one tiny green attribute when everything else is not green.

5. Best in class. Declaring you are slightly greener than the rest, even if the rest are pretty terrible.
6. Just not credible. “Eco friendly” cigarettes, anyone? “Greening” a dangerous product doesn’t make it safe.
7. Jargon. Information that only a scientist could check or understand.
8. Imaginary friends. A “label” that looks like third party endorsement — except that it’s made up.
9. No proof. It could be right, but where’s the evidence?
10. Out-right lying. Totally fabricated claims or data.

Guide for preventing greenwash

The most useful part of the report is the “Guide for Preventing Greenwash” section. They suggest an “Impact, Align, Communicate” framework. Be sure your facts are correct, engage both internal and external stakeholders to gain support and communicate it accurately.

The report includes a list of questions to guide companies in their marketing efforts.

Impact:

- Is the topic of your message a significant environmental achievement?
- Is the issue you are addressing material to your business?

- Have you invested significant resources (time, funds, and people)?
- Did you spend more money on the activity than on communications?
- Have you already achieved the results in your claim?

Alignment:

- Have you worked with multiple functions within your company?
- Are other activities in your company consistent with this message?
- Have you engaged stakeholders and incorporated their feedback?
- Could your claim be supported by a credible third party?

Communication:

- Is it easy for people to understand your claim and its significance?
- Do people consider your company trustworthy?

- Do you have data to back up your claim?
- Are you conveying your understanding of the big picture?
- Is the message honest and not self-glorifying?

The challenges

I think two of the key challenges to being a true green brand is accessing accurate information on the footprint of your products and services along your value chain. It isn't always easy to access full information. And second, I am not convinced that companies are ready to fully embrace transparency. I would have liked to see the report dive deeper into the perceived business risks of transparency and the benefits of embracing it.