



A New Tool for Avoiding Greenwash

By Andrew Winston

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As we enter the week of the 40th Anniversary of Earth Day, we're sure to see an overwhelming number of announcements about corporate environmental efforts. Most companies feel the need to say *something* about the good work they're doing (at least in their own minds). The big risk is that they'll step into that nether world of "greenwash."

For the past few years, I've found one tool very helpful when it comes to thinking about sustainability messaging and identifying ads that go too far: the "Seven Sins of Greenwashing" from TerraChoice. But I can now add another excellent guide to the mix: "From Greenwash to Great: A Practical Guide to Great Green Marketing (without the Greenwash)" from advertising giant Ogilvy & Mather (Full disclosure: I'm an informal advisor to Ogilvy Earth, and I'm quoted in the Guide, but I had very little to do with its creation).

Where the Seven Sins piece describes the kinds of errors advertisers make, the Ogilvy Guide takes the next step with more of a "how-to" on avoiding the exaggerations and missteps that plague sustainable communications. The relatively short document describes best practice in three broad sections – Planning Your Approach, Developing Communications, and Launch

and Beyond – with nine specific steps to follow, each illustrated by one important case study.

Close watchers of green branding will recognize many of these stories, such as the power of Clorox's Green Works partnership with Sierra Club. But I still found a few new gems in there, and the thoroughness of the overall framework is very helpful.

As Ogilvy launches the guide this week (see www.ogilvyearth.com/greenwash on April 21), I wanted to give my readers advance notice and provide a quick taste of a tool that can help you wage a smart, honest, green communications and advertising campaign.

For a short word on what's at stake here, I'll quote from the Guide: "Clearly the appetite for compelling, solutions-oriented sustainability communications remains strong. But greenwashing threatens to alienate this growing support and undermine the credibility of [all] sustainability communications."

Here are a few of the guidelines that focus on the communications development phase...

Make Honesty a Priority and Embrace the Detail



At its core, avoiding greenwash seems really simple – just tell the truth (which is necessary, but not sufficient since even the truth can make for ineffectual or unimpressive claims – see the Seven Sins on that point). Ogilvy’s Guide highlights Patagonia’s Footprint Chronicles as a great example of “brave honesty.” Patagonia innovative transparency site opens up its supply chain, sharing footprint data and showing the journey that 16 typical products take from design to fiber to assembly to customer. The company embraces the details of the story, as does Coke in its ads about the exact composition of its new “Plant Bottle.” Kimberly-Clark is also specific about the amount of recycled fiber in each of its Scott Naturals paper products – their pitch is that they’ve found the right level of recycled content to maintain product performance and quality (I’ve just recently joined K-C’s Sustainable Advisory Board and will have more perspectives to share soon, but see also Jacquie Ottman’s take on Scott Naturals). In general, as consumers get more educated, they will demand, and respond to, communications with better and more specific data.

Find Strength in Humility



Many companies make the mistake of overstating the importance of the work

they’re doing. The smarter, more experienced players on the field of sustainability know how far they have to go. I’m reminded of how the former CEO of Wal-Mart, Lee Scott, told an audience in 2008, “We’re not green.” I knew then that the giant retailer actually got it. Ogilvy uses the example of how Frito-Lay’s SunChips demonstrates some amount of modesty. The fun campaign about the solar power behind its chip plant is proud, but not overly boastful about saving the world (while the SunChips website does take on some grandiosity, the actual ads are fairly mellow). SunChips partnered with National Geographic on a campaign to take up the theme of “small steps can bring about big change.” The lesson here is not to go the route of those hotel bathroom cards that tell you how the planet’s fate depends on hanging up your towel.

Show, Don't tell



Part of being true to yourself and showing some humility is not just trumpeting your intentions and actions, but actually doing it. The Handbook highlights DuPont’s efforts in Greensburg, Kansas following the devastating tornado that destroyed the town. The quiet company donated sustainable building materials and staff know-how to the rebuilding effort. DuPont got attention as Discovery Channel’s *Planet Green* covered the action, so it wasn’t purely philanthropic (but when I have ever said you should go green and not expect some brand or financial benefit?). DuPont was able to

bring its product line to bear in an interesting way in the real world helping real people. As Ogilvy puts it simply, "Seeing is believing."