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Manufacturers: Beware of "Greenwashing"

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There are a number of companies already addressing some of the green manufacturing challenges … and there are many who are not (yet).

Andy Warhol said "Art is what you can get away with." Ditto for advertising. Unfortunately also ditto for much green advertising.

According to Wikipedia greenwashing is "a term used to describe the practice of companies disingenuously spinning their products and policies as environmentally friendly." Consider the "six sins of greenwashing" from Terrachoice to help you determine is something is, or is not, greenwashing.

We've all been in hotel rooms with the placard about reusing our towels to save water and detergent. That is usually next to the heated mirror or, in the case of one hotel I stayed in recently in a foreign country, the electric toilet which required the use of buttons/electric motors to accomplish simple tasks – like raising the seat! What's wrong with this picture?

A recent advert for a lawnmower with an exceptionally tight turning radius proclaimed it was green because you could cut your lawn in less time (due to fewer maneuvers I suppose) thanks to this feature. Let's be clear. Things that are done in the normal course of product or process improvement to enhance productivity, reduce cost, etc., should not really be claimed as green. We'd like to think that smart manufacturers follow a path of continuous improvement anyways.

If, however, you consider the impact of any process changes or improvements on the environment, or energy consumption, or greenhouse gas emission, water use, etc., as part of your continuous improvement – that counts. And, if you make decisions on how your improvements or modifications evolve with that impact in mind, that's green.

This is not always a clear decision. If I run a copier company, and I change my business strategy to take back used toner cartridges from my customers, re-manufacture (or at least refill them) and send them back out as part of the normal resupply (at no cost penalty) that is smart business. If I can lower the price a bit due to my savings and gain market share that's even better. And, good for the environment. I'd probably call that green – even though the major impetus for this was perhaps not environmental impact. But, if in the tradeoff analysis between the materials, energy, transportation and handling expended in providing virgin toner cartridges versus re-covering used ones and returning them to service shows that the reuse is also better on all these counts – that's green.

In my classes, I use a couple of examples of companies that are pursuing this with a passion and are consistent with green principles (which we've not clearly defined but let's let that go for the moment). Suffice it to say, they are not greenwashing.

Prominent in this list is Interface Carpets. Interface, very early in this movement, defined a corporate strategy, defined metrics for measuring how they are doing and tried to include a balance of the three legs of sustainability in their approach – social, economic and environmental. And they report their progress annually. Their CEO, Ray Anderson, developed "Ecometrics" as the term for their measurement system to track their progress. These indicators include waste reduction, renewable energy, carbon emissions, water and energy usage, and percentage of recycled and biobased materials in products. Much more detail on their site includes data on the reduction of energy used per unit of product manufactured, waste diverted landfills, etc. They are green manufacturers and one of the leaders of developing a business strategy for green manufacturing and, eventually, sustainability.

Some may argue that "carpets are not semiconductors" so this is easy to accomplish in such an industry. Not fair. The principles they are developing and following are applicable across a wide range of industries of varying complexities.