Andrew Winston Blog

Avoiding Greenwash and its Dangers

By Andrew Winston

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This week is the fortieth anniversary of Earth Day. The hype is unbelievably high as companies step all over themselves to share their latest sustainability accomplishments. In general, this is a good thing and it's wonderful to see companies competing on green.

But there is a high risk of saying something that isn't quite true, or of overstating the truth. Because this is the time of year for somewhat self-important pronouncements of changing the world, it's also a time for greenwash.

The incidence of actual, pure greenwash – outright, purposeful untruths about the environmental attributes or impacts of products – is probably not that high. But there's an awful lot out there that gets close (for a truly excellent review of the key missteps that would qualify, see the Seven Sins of Greenwashing from Terrachoice).

We've all seen some doozies along these lines. An ad touting paper-free banking as a way to save the forests, last year, not in 1997. A cheap car made specifically for the developing world (and not an electric car, mind you) presented for no apparent reason on a backdrop of a wind farm. I'm sure you've seen ads like these, and worse.

The problem of greenwash seems like a mild issue to worry about. But as advertising giant Ogilvy & Mather puts it in a new report, greenwash is actually "an extremely serious matter...it is insidious, eroding consumer trust, contaminating the credibility of all sustainability-related marketing and hence inhibiting progress toward a sustainable economy." In other words, it's very hard for customers to know what choices make a difference when some marketers are muddying the waters for all. When buyers throw up their hands in confusion, we all lose.

This perspective comes from Ogilvy's new guide for managing your brand: "From Greenwash to Great: A Practical Guide to Great Green Marketing (without the Greenwash)." (Full disclosure: I'm an informal advisor to Ogilvy Earth, and I'm quoted in this document, but I had very little to do with its creation).

The guide offers a simple framework in three buckets – Planning Your Approach, Developing Communications, and Launch and Beyond – with nine common-sense steps. For a preview of this helpful document (launching on the 21st), and some ideas of the kinds of stories they share, here are a couple deceptively simple prescriptions in the

"Planning" phase (for a few more of the ideas in the guide, see my monthly e-letter here).

Focus on Fundamentals

This first step is where so many go wrong. An honest green story starts from inside the company, not from a marketing idea that you then try to spin. You need hard facts on the environmental improvement you're claiming, such as a certain amount of recycled content in your product or the energy used when your customers turn your gadget on. These benefits need to be measurable, verified, and not insignificant to the product's real footprint (e.g., a two-stroke engine lawn mower that hypes its recycled packaging is missing the point a bit). Ogilvy shares the story of Unilever's Hellmann's mayonnaise in the UK. The company explored its sustainability impacts, did the hard work on figuring out its supply chain, and made a switch to free-range eggs. Once it had its new policy in place, the company then made the pitch to consumers.

Get Out Ahead

Starting from an honest place doesn't mean you have to think small. Companies can still be bold and set new standards. One of my favorite examples of getting out ahead is IBM's Smarter Planet, perhaps the best green ad campaign in history. It's, well, very smart.

The company took an issue the IT industry is struggling with – the significant and growing climate and energy impacts of information and communications technologies (which is now produce over 2% of global emissions) – and flipped it on its head. Don't worry about the growth of IT, this campaign basically says, we're going to use our technology to solve much bigger environmental and energy problems (it's about tackling "the other 98" as many call it). We're going to build smarter transportation systems, smarter cities, and a smarter world.

Others in the IT community had talked about it, but IBM stuck its head out to own it. And they had the stories and case studies to back it up. It's my favorite green positioning because it doesn't talk about saving us from doom and gloom; it just asks us all to be smarter. And who doesn't want that?

The rest of Ogilvy's handbook shares some best practice ideas on executing a green campaign and beyond. While those buried in the green branding world may recognize many of the stories, there are some good gems even for the most knowledgeable, and a helpful framework for all.