

Greenwashing: Making Companies Come Clean About Their Claims

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With another company claiming to be "green" seemingly every day, it's becoming more difficult to decipher what's real and what's hype.

As the business of going green becomes increasingly more important, it's necessary to understand the meaning of green and where the future of this movement is headed so that companies can implement environmentally responsible programs to help sustain our planet.

The Rise Of The Green Business Revolution

Some people are convinced that going green is just another trend and are unwilling to adopt environmentally responsible lifestyles and operations and remain standing on the sidelines of the environmental movement.

This group, however, is shrinking.

According to a recent survey by SCA Tissue North America, the business of green is on the rise with more than three-quarters of business decision-makers purchasing green products and most saying they believe the role of the environment will increase in the future.

These are strong indications that the green movement is here to stay.

Additionally, the facts regarding our environment make the case for corporate, holistic stewardship.

The planet's population has increased from 4 billion people in 1950 to 6.8 billion in 2008.

By 2025, experts predict 9 billion people will inhabit the Earth, further straining limited reserves of natural resources unless environmentally responsible practices become a way of life.

More and more businesses are initiating green efforts as the benefits of strategically aligning environmentally friendly practices with specific business goals become apparent.

Larger companies are more likely to make the transition to environmental responsibility, since they have more customers and stakeholders influencing the adoption of such practices.

However, greenwashing, which is understood as the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service, remains a reoccurring theme as companies join the bandwagon and make green claims about products and services that may not be valid.

The definition of greenwashing has also continued to change because the marketing and value put behind products are also evolving.

For instance, companies are starting their own green certification programs and publicizing broad statements about environmentally responsible practices that may or may not be legitimate.

Lowering The Green Noise

The green noise has become overwhelming and saturated in the industry.

Companies should be educated to work within standards already set by trusted third parties.

In a recent study commissioned by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing and their EcoLogo Program, "Seven Sins of Greenwashing" were found to exist in the realm of the consumer market.

Here are a few of the most common mistakes companies are making when trying to bolster green efforts and claims:

- **Sin of the Hidden Trade-off:** A claim suggesting that a product is green based on a narrow set of attributes without attention to other important environmental issues. Paper, for example, is not necessarily environmentally preferable just because it comes from a sustainably-harvested forest. Other important environmental issues in the papermaking process like greenhouse gas emissions or chlorine use in bleaching may be equally important.

- **Sin of No Proof:** An environmental claim that cannot be substantiated by easily accessible supporting information or by a reliable third-party certification. Common examples are facial tissues or toilet tissue products that claim various percentages of post-consumer recycled content without providing evidence.
- **Sin of Vagueness:** A claim that is so poorly defined or broad that its real meaning is likely to be misunderstood by the consumer; "all-natural" is an example. Arsenic, uranium, mercury and formaldehyde are all naturally occurring ... and poisonous. All-natural isn't necessarily green.

For the complete ranking of the "Seven Sins of Greenwashing," please visit <http://sinsofgreenwashing.org/findings/the-seven-sins>.

Understanding And Identifying Credible Green Claims

Although most respondents to the recent SCA survey are somewhat confident in their personal comprehension of green matters — with more than 90 percent stating an average to strong understanding of environmental issues, concerns and impacts — much confusion still exists regarding the meaning of green.

Results show environmental messaging is over-saturating the marketplace with many consumers wary of the abundance of green claims made by manufacturers today.

In fact, most respondents feel that products declaring to be green are probably environmentally friendly, but also exaggerate claims.

Complaints about the misuse of green terminology have increased dramatically in recent years.

Many businesses, purposely or not, commit greenwashing sins and mislead consumers about the environmental benefits of a product or the practices of a company.

These missteps can include lack of proof, vagueness or even lying.

The good news is that the growing availability of green products shows that consumers are seeking full disclosure and transparency regarding products and practices — and marketers and manufacturers are listening.

As the green field matures, the financial business case becomes more accepted and companies succeed based on real change, we will see fewer of these non-credible green claims.

There are measures we can take as business decision-makers to establish ourselves as credible leaders in the environmental field, such as getting green certified.

Unfortunately, the number of green certifications available is abundant as well as confusing to decipher.

David Gottfried, Tork® Green Hygiene Council™ (TGHC) member, managing director of Regenerative Ventures Inc. and founder and first staff president of the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC), offers these certification recommendations for greening a business:

- Start simple and utilize the ENERGY STAR certification, which allows

business owners to set basic goals and track savings

- Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) certification is the best standard for measuring building sustainability
- Green Seal Inc. and EcoLogo are credible, non-profit organizations that provide science-based environmental certification standards for products and services.

As consumers make their way through the green noise, they should be aware of common greenwashing tactics companies tend to use.

For instance, the fine print of a product's green description and its third-party certifications are key indicators of the product's environmentally-sound validity.

Through researching the manufacturer, one can determine if the company is committed to the environment and using holistic practices when producing all of its product lines.