

Some things may not be as green as they seem: Greenwashing

In a world where people are becoming increasingly aware of environmental problems, there is an increase in demand for environmentally friendly products. This 'green consumerism' has led to a drastic increase in creating green alternatives/ improvements to existing products, and also to an increase in greenwashing.

Greenwashing is a term which refers to a misleading claim that products, businesses or practices are more environmentally friendly than they really are, and in turn are deceiving the public. Just type in greenwashing advertisements into a google image search, and numerous advertisements show up. While they often highlight that improvements have been made towards making a product more ecological, these improvements do not mean that these products are sustainable.

An Example of Greenwashing

A famous example of green washing can be found by clicking this [link](#). It shows an advertisement from Shell in 2008 which emphasizes the need to reduce carbon emissions and the need for an emphasis on technological advancements. Below are a few of the statements that the advertisement makes:

"A growing world needs more energy, but at the same time we need to find new ways of managing carbon emissions to limit climate change. Continued investment in technology is one of the key ways we are able to address this challenge, and continue to secure a profitable and sustainable future"

"The challenge of the 21st century is to meet the growing need for energy in ways that are not only profitable but sustainable. As our 2007 results show, we're investing heavily in new technology and assets to safeguard the interests of our shareholders and future generations. In Canada we're harnessing our global network of technical and financial expertise to unlock the potential of the vast Canadian oil sands deposit. In the USA we're helping to build what will be the nation's largest refinery. And we're exploring a new generation of biofuels made from non-food sources. Difficult yes, impossible no"
– (Shell 2008 in ASA 2012)

While this advertisement seems great at first, it is very misleading. It gives the impression that Shell's operations are entirely oriented towards creating a sustainable future, but at the same time it discusses the oil sands, and oil refineries- which are far from sustainable. The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA, an independent advertising standards authority in the United Kingdom), found this ad to be misleading and prevented further distribution of that add in the UK. The detailed ASA decision can be found by clicking this [link](#).

Beware of Misleading Labels and Get Informed!

More examples of greenwashing were recently reported by [CBC \(2012\)](#), which specifically highlighted numerous household products in Canada which do not meet the green claims on their labels. Many of these projects demonstrate that consumers need to be aware of legitimate eco-labels and that they need to look closely at labels (but even then it can be difficult to determine if is "green"). The UN has a great guide to environmental labels which can be found by clicking [here](#). Pages 27-28 focus on things to look for in greenwashed products such as exaggerated language, "green" images and key terminology.

While it is fantastic that people are looking for more ecological products, it is crucial that consumers are aware of what they are buying. If it seems too good to be true, maybe it is... somethings may not be as green as they seem. Be sure to check out green purchasing guides and inform yourself of the various eco-labels in your country!

What about greenwashing entire cities?

Beyond 'green consumerism' and 'green' businesses, what about 'green' cities? Do you think there are cities out there which are making themselves seem more sustainable than they are? Or are they using sustainability in some areas to compensate for other non-sustainable actions? What do you think?

Additional Links of Interest:

Greenwashing in Cities:

The Gaurdian published an article in 2009 entitled "[Greenwash: The dream of the first eco-city was built on a fiction](#)"

Greenwashing in General:

EnviroMedia Social Marketing and the University of Oregon created a Greenwashing Index available at this [link](#)

Greenpeace has highlighted some recent [greenwashing ads](#) on their website.

The US Federal Trade Commission's has a website on [sorting out 'green' advertising claims](#)

References:

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