

Preventing Greenwashing, One Company at a Time

By GreenBiz Staff, August 12, 2009, GreenBiz.com

SAN FRANCISCO, CA — With the rise of environmental awareness among businesses and shoppers alike comes a rise of greenwashing -- intentional or not. In the U.K., complaints about greenwashing have been rapidly climbing for some time, and one study found that almost all companies had committed at least one of the seven sins of greenwashing.

But a new report from Business for Social Responsibility and Futerra Sustainability Communications aims to help companies avoid those mistakes.

The new report, "Understanding and Preventing Greenwash: A Business Guide," [PDF] lays out a "greenwash matrix" of the different types of poor communication about corporate environmental activities, and explores the ways firms can move toward messages that more clearly explain their green works.



The "Greenwash Matrix."

"[Shoppers] want to trust the company from which they are buying goods and services, and honest communications are key," said Diane Osgood, BSR's Vice President of CSR Strategy, in a statement. "Our guide helps companies curtail greenwash and build the trust of consumers."

There are three elements to a framework for effective communications, according to the report: Impact, Alignment and Communication. Under the impact header, avoiding greenwash means a company's sustainability practices or products must be based on real, significant environmental impact. In other words, if a company is spending more on communications

about their green projects than the green project itself, it's a likely sign of greenwashing.

To properly align a green project, companies need to make sure there is significant internal and external support for the practice. BSR and Futerra recommend working with a credible third party to impartially evaluate the impact of any green activity.

Finally, when communicating their successes, companies should focus on clarity and transparency, making sure that customers understand what the company has achieved and that the company can back their claims up with hard data.

The report also includes a list of the top 10 "signs of greenwash" to help companies avoid making any unintentional mistakes. Those signs are:

- 1. Fluffy language.** Words or terms with no clear meaning (e.g. "eco-friendly").
- 2. Green product vs. dirty company.** Such as efficient lightbulbs made in a factory that pollutes rivers.
- 3. Suggestive pictures.** Green images that indicate a (unjustified) green impact (e.g. flowers blooming from exhaust pipes).
- 4. Irrelevant claims.** Emphasizing one tiny green attribute when everything else is not green.
- 5. Best in class.** Declaring you are slightly greener than the rest, even if the rest are pretty terrible.
- 6. Just not credible.** "Eco friendly" cigarettes, anyone? "Greening" a dangerous product doesn't make it safe.
- 7. Jargon.** Information that only a scientist could check or understand.
- 8. Imaginary friends.** A "label" that looks like third party endorsement -- except that it's made up.
- 9. No proof.** It could be right, but where's the evidence?
- 10. Out-right lying.** Totally fabricated claims or data.

You can download the report, "Understanding and Preventing Greenwash: A Business Guide," [from GreenBiz.com](https://www.greenbiz.com), and for more information visit [BSR.org](https://www.bsr.org) and [Futerra.co.uk](https://www.futerra.co.uk).