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Avoiding the "greenwash" tag

Every company wants to be seen as being conscious about the environment. But for some, it's more spin than substance

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Last year received an email mailshot from a company claiming to be the "greenest" plant hire company because it had contracted another company to plant a tree every time somebody hired one of its machines. While the aim might be laudable, the true value of this initiative is somewhat debatable, considering that the company's activities involve large trucks driving around the country all year round. To our minds, this is a classic example of corporate "greenwash" - the touting of unsubstantiated, nebulous or irrelevant claims, facts or activities in an attempt to appear more environmentally friendly.

From a PR perspective, greenwashing is not only unethical, it is counter-productive. There is an increasingly strong media backlash against companies who use greenwashing to try to divert public attention from the less-than-green aspects of their activities or hide the effects of these activities under a sward of green respectability. We recently advised one

of our clients on how they should approach the subject of environmental marketing, which led us to creating a set of guidelines for use by clients considering playing the "green card".

Be clear about your objective

The primary purpose of "going green" should be to achieve a specific environmental benefit; it should not be approached solely as a marketing exercise. There can be some very positive marketing and PR benefits to be derived from adopting more sustainable business practices, but only where such initiatives are genuine and sincere. Planting a tree somewhere and claiming your product is now "green" is simplistic nonsense and greenwash of the most cynical kind.

Be honest, open and balanced

Before embarking on any kind of green campaign, take a serious look at your activities; make an honest appraisal of the environmental impacts of your business and where improvements

Companies naturally want to be associated with positive sentiment, and this is particularly true where their activities may have an environmental impact. But no amount of positive PR can cover-up real problems and it's wrong to try and do so.



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could be made. Using green rhetoric to promote a low-energy light bulb made in a factory that needlessly pollutes the environment is greenwash: Talking about the specific actions the company has made to reduce that pollution, is not. Obviously, lying or making deliberately misleading statements is completely out of the question.

Be in it for the long term

Once you have embarked upon any form of PR campaign based on your environmental activities, you must sustain those activities or risk being accused of merely "jumping on the bandwagon". It is therefore important that you take time to consider the long-term implications of your activities - are they realistic? manageable? worthwhile?

Greenwashing is not just unethical - it's counterproductive

Don't be vague or obscure

A lot of greenwash uses vague, nebulous terms such as "eco-friendly", "environmentally sound" or "green" - none of which have any clear meaning and are therefore impossible to substantiate. Claims which cannot be substantiated are likely to be regarded as greenwash. Likewise, don't use obscure scientific terms or arguments. Make sure any claims you make can be proven and that you clearly identify the specific environmental benefits of your product: Talking about "carbon-neutral" and "carbon-offset" is rather vague and woolly; Pointing to the improvements you've made to your product that have resulted in a 50% reduction in energy use is a strong statement of your commitment to sustainable business practices. Lastly, don't use emotive images - trees, flowers, dolphins etc. - unless there is a compelling and justifiable reason to do so.

Sources of further information

For further information on greenwash, have a look at these guides

The CIPR guidelines on environmental communications available in the Tools & Guidelines section at www.cipr.co.uk

The Futerra guide to Greenwash
http://www.futerra.co.uk/downloads/Greenwash_Guide.pdf