

Greenwashing: what it is and why it doesn't go away

BY NICK NORRIS

In recent years, you probably have noticed ads, green in color, that give an “environmentally friendly” impression. When you see these ads, you probably asked yourself some questions on why the ad is designed like this, including if it is environmentally friendly. Usually it's not because this type of ad is called greenwashing.

Greenwashing is a form of public relations spin which is usually a form of deception used to promote a company, or product, with the perception that the company, or product, are environmentally friendly. Greenwashing also attempts to increase profits, gain political support, and manipulate popular opinion in order to support otherwise questionable aims.

Another factor is the visual rhetoric of greenwashing ads. The visual rhetoric is actually misleading, as the ads use concepts such as super technology imagery, green colored visuals, text, and pseudo-science jargon, which contain a lack of credibility, and no proof, as documented in the definitions visual at the bottom. So when someone reads a greenwashing ad, they can not truly understand what is being said when pseudo-science and other “technical” terms are expressed in the ads.

Blogger Michael Benton has studied the history of greenwashing, and its visual rhetoric, in his blog. In a Thursday, February 19, 2004 posting, he states that it's difficult to find the exact origins of when greenwashing and its advertising started; however, there has been a dramatic increase of these ads since Earth Day 1990.



1. Fluffy language
Words or terms with no clear meaning, eg 'eco-friendly'

2. Green products v dirty company
Such as efficient light bulbs made in a factory which pollutes rivers



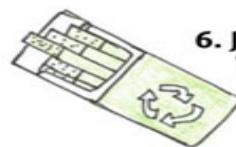
3. Suggestive pictures
Green images that indicate a (unjustified) green impact, eg flowers blooming from exhaust pipes



4. Irrelevant claims
Emphasising one tiny green attribute when everything else is un-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. Gobbledygook
Jargon and information that only a scientist could check or understand



8. Imaginary friends
A 'label' that looks like third-party endorsement...except it's made up

9. No proof
It could be right, but where's the evidence?



10. Outright lying
Totally fabricated claims or data

“Unfortunately, from orange juice to wood products, consumers have been fooled by environmental product claims advertised by corporations. The problem is aggravated because shoppers cannot confirm whether a product is truly ozone-friendly or biodegradable in the same way they can check whether a laundry detergent removes stains better or batteries last longer.” - Michael Benton



With the increased use of greenwashing in advertising, Benton notes that companies are using its misleading claims to capitalize on people wanting to buy environmentally friendly products. He goes on to say that there have been attempts to end greenwashing due to the misleading claims.

First, there was the Campaign for Truth in Advertising which started in November 1990. Here, a task force of ten state attorney generals released "The Green Report" which reviewed greenwashing ads at the time, particularly for labels that said "degradable," "recyclable," and "recycled."

The second attempt happened when the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) set up guidelines on businesses that had environmental claims on their products in 1992. These were known as the "Green Guides" which the FTC gradually worked to refine and completed in 1998. However, the FTC guidelines are not legally enforceable but they do set a standard.

With these restrictions, Benton notes that the current guidelines are far less strict on corporations when it comes to greenwashing and its visual rhetoric, particularly for ads by food, oil, chemical, and paper companies.

Today, greenwashing, and its visual rhetoric, will unfortunately continue to mislead with super technology, green colored visuals, and pseudo-science visual rhetoric in ads. However, it is still up to the consumer to be able to tell what is in the ad and if it is really environmentally friendly.

Cited Work:

Benton, Michael. "History of Corporate Greenwashing and Top Ten Offenders of 2003." Web log post. Dialogic. N.p., 19 Feb. 2004. Web. 3 Nov. 2012.