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Spin cycle

Off-colour "green" campaigns are a classic PR faux pas, eroding consumer trust and earning the wrath of media. So how do you avoid being accused of "greenwashing"?

By Baila Lazarus

Eco-action plans, carbon taxes, sustainability budgets, renewable energy. The greenwashing of spin has taken a foothold and the bandwagon has taken on the size of Mt. Rushmore.

As environmental initiatives occupy the foreground of Canadians' concerns, more companies want to wrap themselves in green, and they're turning to PR companies to come up with the right strategy. While stamping their product or service as "eco-friendly" might seem like a great solution, however, the rhetoric floating around eco-debates often detracts from realistic solutions.

"One of the big challenges we find is ways of helping people distinguish between politics and science," said Tom Tevlin, president of Greenspirit Strategies Ltd. "When we're talking about sustainability, we're trying to focus on data – ways of measuring improvements in sustainability in trying to chart how sustainability is progressing. We're trying to keep objectively and scientifically based on those measures. The real challenge is to try to stay focused on the science of sustainability, not falling prey to campaign rhetoric or historic misconceptions."

Campaign rhetoric or "greenwashing" can be well-intentioned but may blur out serious logistical considerations, such as those that crop up around energy.

"How do we ensure society gets the electricity needed to run its hospitals and its homes?" said Tevlin. "People are making the assumption about what can be done with wind power or solar power, without considering the fact that you need base-load power. … When it comes to how they are going to power their home, they want the answer to be very simple."

Illustration: Rory O'Sullivan

Simple communication messages must not be ambiguous, however. Consumers are growing tired of the same old lines like "environmentally friendly" or "eco-sustainable." This terminology has had its day, says James Hoggan of James Hoggan and Associates in Vancouver.

"Canadians are so mistrustful of business when it comes to the environment. So when you're trying to send a message out to the public of a certain kind of green initiative, you are sending a message out into an environment of mistrust.

"You have to be careful not to generalize too much, and to tie the message to things you've actually done and use language of accountability, so people can look at you and make up their mind based on factual information." Clichéd buzzwords, he contends, are "counterproductive."

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> *- Tom Tevlin, president, Greenspirit Strategies Ltd.*

Along with the vague terminology are self-proclaimed certifications and industry-led associations that have resulted in a lot of confusion within the consumer market, according to Rebecca Irani, an account director with Grey Vancouver. Trying to understand the difference between Fair Trade, shade-grown, bird-friendly or ethically sourced coffee could send a buyer reaching for the Sanka.

"Which one is best? Who has the authoritative voice? People can and do get confused with the complexity of products and certifications," said Irani. "A good recommendation if one of your clients wants to send out a green message, would be to work or partner with an organization that specializes in this field – get them on board – with supporting quotes in releases, joint events or networking forums. Alternatively, bringing on board true green ambassadors who are credible in both the public's and media's eyes is also advisable, but can be somewhat costly."

Peter Ter Weeme, a marketing strategist with Vancouver's Junxion Strategy, says companies have to be very careful because savvy critics and consumers will uncover lies very quickly.

"There are a hell of a lot of watchdogs these days who are keeping corporations on a pretty short leash if they stray too far from telling the truth"

- Peter Ter Weeme (left), marketing strategist, Junxion Strategy

"There are some organizations who put themselves forward as more Catholic than the Pope because they recycle or brought in Energy Star appliances," said Ter Weeme. "And that's yesterday's news. The consumer is not going to be easily swayed on practices that should be a given."

To compensate, organizations need to dig more deeply and move beyond the basic behaviour to try and find a unique story that resonates with consumers. "It has to be profound; it can't just be window dressing."

Irani agrees: "The public switches off if it's bombarded and it will also question a company's reasons for suddenly wanting to save the world. It's important for companies to be transparent and genuine about their commitment – people have very quickly wizened to companies that are superficially green."

If a company strays too far in making false claims, they could be faced with a backlash from consumers and critics alike.

"If you scratch the surface as an educator, you can see very quickly if you're being greenwashed or not, so marketers have to understand that you can't just wrap a product in a green wrapping," said Ter Weeme. "There are a hell of a lot of watchdogs these days who are keeping corporations on a pretty short leash if they stray too far from telling the truth."

One of those watchdogs is the Ottawa- and Pennsylvania-based TerraChoice Environmental. A study it released in November 2007, entitled "Six Sins of Greenwashing," found that in a random survey of more than 1,000 products, 99% of green claims were misleading.

"The products we surveyed made a total of 1,753 claims, and 99% committed at least one of the Six Sins of Greenwashing," said TerraChoice president Scott McDougall. The six sins, as defined by TerraChoice, are:

- hidden trade-off, where you have to give up being green in one area in order to be green in another;
- no proof, making unsubstantiated claims;
- vagueness: terms like "all natural," "earth-friendly";
- irrelevance: making claims that sound good but are no longer an issue;
- fibbing: making false claims;
- lesser of two evils: selling a product that still harms the environment, but in a less destructive way than similar products.

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According to TerraChoice, 57% of the claims made by the products committed the first sin – that of a hidden trade-off.

Hoggan suggests that to ensure a company measures up and isn't seen as a greenwasher, it must market its green information to its "most reasonable critics."

"Whatever it is that you're trying to assert, if that would appeal to your reasonable critics, you're on safer ground in trying to deal with these credibility issues.

"When you don't have credibility on an issue, and someone else does, your reputation is in their control. You don't want to create an impression that can be very easily demolished by a critic." ■

Photo: Dominic Schaefer