



AIRCLEAR

SHADES OF GREEN

The fine line between
Sustainability & Greenwashing

by Steven M. O'Connor



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Over the last half-century, companies have begun to recognize the importance of their business's image. Branding for corporations is not a new concept, by properly appealing to consumers they can increase sales, and even target certain previously unreachable audiences. As the pressures to increase profitability rise, often times it can lead to manipulative practices in order to reach their otherwise elusive goals. When organizations begin to make claims about the ever-increasing popular term "sustainability" then it's always a very good idea to remain somewhat skeptical of the motives. When companies invest their resources into deceptive marketing campaigns rather than actually initiating the steps to become more environmentally conscious, they are "greenwashing."



The term "greenwashing" (also referred to as "green sheen") is a tactic employed by companies that deceive customers into thinking that their products/services are doing more to protect the environment than they actually are. Unfortunately, this devious marketing tactic really only undermines the issue it is claiming to want resolved. Greenwashing can take on multiple forms. Say you're staying at a hotel and you notice a reminder on the light-switch that says "save the planet please turn off the lights before leaving" Now is that hotel truly concerned with the environment or do they just want to keep their power costs down? In fact, the term "greenwashing" was coined by Jay Westerveld after writing a disgruntled essay inspired by the irony of the hotel's "save the towel" campaign. Westerveld argued all the hotels' true motives were to save money. When corporations perform hollow symbolic gestures that have been conjured up by advertising and marketing campaigns rather than actually doing the work to minimize their environmental impact it can be more than simply misleading.

Spotting greenwashing oftentimes can be difficult due to the lack of accountability or regulation. Images like the color green, (which is ironically the most toxic combination of pigments of all the colors of inks/paints) or pictures that reflect sustainability like windmills or trees, clear blue skies can be red flags for greenwashing. It's also important to look for overused



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environmental buzzwords with little to no actual substance. Terms like; “carbon neutral”, “biodegradation”, “eco-friendly”, “farm fresh”, “all-natural” and “sustainability” etc., are all words that should raise skepticism among consumers. False statements/claims of legitimacy, deflections, and devious branding are all tactics used in greenwashing. A company may be hyper-specific about one aspect of their business, such as using recycled materials, when the rest of their production is harmful to the environment. Some companies would rather just throw money at the problem with strategies like “Carbon Offsetting” rather than making necessary environmental changes to their production. Carbon Offsetting is a process that compensates for the emission of Carbon Dioxide/greenhouse gases to the atmosphere which can be bought, sold, or traded, especially as part of a system to reduce pollutants. Paying to restore strips of forest to represent the counter to their harmful carbon dioxide emissions. In some cases, implanting air pollution control equipment would be the most effective way of massively reducing air pollution for their companies. The fact still remains that even 1 trillion trees would only make a small dent in civilization's escalating carbon problem not to mention the fact that as the world continues to get hotter and hotter those trees become more susceptible to wildfires. Carbon Offsets vary in their effectiveness and popularity. Typical offsets include increasing energy efficiency, reforestation, developing renewable energy, and sequestering carbon in soil/capture devices.

Going back to the 1980's the fossil fuel industry has run multi-billion dollars worth of ads boasting climate change denial themes with the goal of confusing the general public and policymakers about the causes and solutions of climate change. Some of their tactics are making ads that look like editorials, economic scaremongering, and calling facts “theories”. One of the most egregious cases of greenwashing has come from BP or British Petroleum. The fourth-largest oil company in the world has on numerous occasions employed deceptive Marketing and PR efforts that have had staggering results. The most disturbing of all...launching a PR campaign with a false sense of environmental credibility that was designed to deflect blame for climate change and launch disinformation on renewable energy.

With the topic of climate change becoming more important than ever, the revelation that BP's 2004 campaign to absolve themselves of ever-rising temperatures had ulterior motives that did not get recognized by the public right away. In the early aughts, BP hired the public relations team Ogilvy & Mather to promote the spin that individuals should look at their own daily actions and accept responsibility for climate change and not blame the oil giant that produces millions of pounds of emissions every year. Often referred to as the most efficaciously deceptive



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PR campaigns in history, it successfully popularized the term “carbon footprint” and introduced the “carbon footprint calculator” to evaluate how normal life is responsible for global warming. To get your results you simply punch in your personal details and it shows you how your lifestyle contributes to carbon emissions. Recently a group of researchers at MIT calculated the carbon footprint of a homeless individual and found out that shockingly emit 8.5 tons of Carbon Dioxide a year. Proving that calculator is nothing more than pure propaganda when you live in a fossil fuel-based society.

In the end greenwashing can be costly, just ask Volkswagen. Their “Diesel Gate” scandal in 2015 cost the company an estimated 30 billion dollars. By making false claims about their diesel vehicles being better for the environment than their competitors, when in actuality Volkswagen installed software into more than 11 million automobiles that deceived emission tests into giving favorable results. The outcome was widespread recalls and collective lawsuits from consumers. Experts believe that the German Automobile manufacturer is still recovering from the fallout.

Can we make transparency a priority for business? As awareness surrounding climate change becomes widely acknowledged the reality is that it presents systemic risks to the U.S. economy by threatening the stability of financial markets worldwide. There are steps being taken, such as on March 21, 2022, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) proposed new rules that if passed require companies to disclose emissions including scope 3 climate pollution from products. Companies that address climate risks do so voluntarily so the results are inconsistent and unreliable. They will have to submit to the SEC how climate risks may affect their revenues and profitability in public filings. Forcing companies to disclose what actions they are taking to address their emission issues is a good first step, still, balance is needed.

The question then becomes can you promote economic development and environmental sustainability simultaneously?

Air Clear strives to answer that question. There are tangible steps that companies can take to make an actual impact rather than just PR smoke screens and camouflaged marketing campaigns. Reducing waste, incorporating recycled material, establishing realistic goals with timelines, and engaging your coworkers, employees, clients, and vendors in your environmental initiatives will help the process evolve. Corporate advertising campaigns with misleading agendas can severely interfere with sincere environmental protection.



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The fact that Air Pollution alone kills 7 million people every year worldwide should be enough of a reason to demand the companies you purchase from are transparent about their sustainability. At Air Clear our goal is to create a cleaner world where businesses can thrive economically without damaging the environment, we all share. Air Clear strives to provide our clients with the most current and efficient solutions for emissions control at affordable prices that stay within their budget while never requiring the sacrificing of quality. As a society, we continue to move toward more sustainable development and that is something intrinsic to Air Clear. The tenets of sustainability require that we focus not only on the environmental factors but economic and social ones as well. It seems to all come back to longevity through quality design and fabrication. Providing our clients with confidence that when they come to Air Clear they're consistently getting the highest quality product at the lowest possible price that only requires minimal maintenance and always outperforms expectations.

The average consumer is now analyzing their purchasing choices/business selection with their commitment to becoming more active in terms of environmental/social responsibility. Major corporations have been shifting toward sustainably sourced raw renewable recycled materials and trying to become more carbon-neutral or completely get to zero emissions. In our current climate, more customers demand sustainability from corporations with whom they do busi-



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