

Greenwash – college essay



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The term greenwash has been around since the early nineties, emerging from the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. In 1999, a combination of the adjective green, in its sense of protecting the environment, and the verb whitewash, meaning, to try to stop people from discovering the true facts about something, was popularized. Greenwashing is what corporations do when they try to make themselves look more environmentally friendly than they truly are (Bruno, 1992).

The term, greenwash, is also used to describe the actions of a company, government, or any other entity that popularizes positive environmental practices by acting in an environmentally friendly way. The term is often employed in campaigns for positive environmental practices. Most environmentalists use the term to describe big energy companies that are known as big polluters, however. Arguably, the greenwashers get away with it more often than not. But, their deceptions do not go entirely unnoticed.

Initially, the use of the term, greenwash, was confined to the context of advertising with an environmentally friendly focus, and the development of brands and images to convince people of the eco-friendliness of particular products. At the same time, however, greenwashing is understood to be the act of trying to pass off unsustainable products as eco-friendly through branding, packaging or mislabeling. It is good to see companies making an effort to go green, and so people naturally want to trust companies when they claim that their products are sustainable.

Several organizations have been developed to give incentives such as awards to corporations that try their utmost to promote an eco-friendly

environment (Stauber & Rampton, 1995). Many corporations have spearheaded eco-friendly campaigns due to initiatives from organizations such as Corpwatch, which gives out bimonthly Greenwash awards to different corporations making an effort in the desired direction. Some energy companies are also known to have donated for the cause. As global environmental problems affect everyone on the planet, issues of nuclear power have appeared as a major conflict among the nations of the world.

Atomic power has been known to cause environmental degradation, especially through greenhouse gas emissions that presently influence global warming trends. The environmentally friendly organizations have spent a lot of money for campaigns against nuclear pollution - on the increase, in recent past. The environmental movement had gained strength during the 1980s; by 1990s, greenwash advertisements had become more popular and more sophisticated. It was during this time that the corporate environmentalism movement was popularized. Around seventy per cent of the Americans were affected by the corporate environmental awareness movement.

As a result of the awareness campaign, people started to prefer green products that were being heavily advertised. The products that entered the United States market were advertised as green, biodegradable, recyclable, ozone friendly, or decomposable. Also as a result of the environmental awareness movement, the world's greatest polluters started to spend millions of dollars to put shiny green layers on their products - a sign of support for the environment. In January 2006, Bloomberg reported that the major polluters had joined hands for environmental conservation by making more environmentally friendly cars.

Manufacturing of biodegradable plastics was advocated around this time. Since then, most companies have taken advantage of the greenwash movement to advertise their products. However, for many companies, greenwash is merely a marketing tool to increase sales. Greenwash, therefore, has for many years referred to the misleading instances of environmental advertising (Elya, 2001). Lately, the term has been used in the political context, with particular reference to policies that appear to promote the well-being of the environment but in fact disguise deeper and more widespread issues of environmental decay.

Thus, the term, greenwashing, is used to give consumers and policy makers the impression that a company is taking the necessary steps to manage the environment. Greenwashing is misleading as many companies provide false information when they advertise their products as green simply to dupe their customers and the government. It creates an illusion about environmental sustainability. At the same time, consumers are being deceived to support companies that promote environmental degradation. This affects the quality of living for future generations, too (Davis, 1992).

Growth of the demand for environmentally friendly goods has led many manufacturers to actually produce environmentally friendly products so as to increase their sales and revenues. Countless customers have been enlightened about the importance of keeping the environment more sustainable. Needless to say, the entire process has promoted improved environmental performance. On the other hand, there has been an increase in negative greenwashing because of market competition. Many organizations make their products and services appear attractive for

potential investors by only claiming that their products and services are environmentally friendly.

Investors that are especially interested in ethical investment or socially responsive investment are oft duped. The following excerpt from the Earth Summit report on environmentally friendly corporate activities sheds more light on the subject: The Summit's failed to confront corporate power in any meaningful way. Governments in Rio allowed big business to avoid a binding legal framework on their activities, opting instead for a voluntary approach to sustainable development. Globalization of greenwash has caused many adverse effects to the environment.

Most companies in the market compete for high market and as such they even use misleading green marketing strategies. Terra Choice environmental marketing Inc. conducted a survey of six categories leading big box stores. In this survey it was identified that out of 1753 environmentally friendly claims 1, 018 products were found to give misleading information thus misleading the consumers. As a result the following sins were committed:

1. Sin of the hidden trade off
2. Sin of no proof
3. Sin of vagueness
4. Sin of irrelevance
5. Sin of Fibbing
6. Sin of lesser of two evils (Lamb, 2001).

Research shows that negative greenwashing has various adverse effects on the consumers and the environment. The most obvious effect is that the consumers might be deceived to purchase goods that actually degrade the environment. Due to great pressure from the environmentalists, many companies use greenwashing advertisements with the intention of attaining a market share. By pretending thus, the companies introduce market failure.

Another effect of greenwashing on the consumers is that it creates skepticism among them.

Moreover, this factor has retarded growth of positive greenwash for conserving the environment. Subsequently, the consumer may distrust the manufacturers and stop supporting green product innovation. The sin of the hidden trade off is commonly committed by manufacturers who claim that a particular product is green when it is not so. A manufacturer may claim that his product is green when only a single raw material is biodegradable. The entire product, on the contrary, may have significant negative effects on the environment (Karliner, 2001). The sin of no proof is also common.

This sin is committed when there is no information that can be used as proof for a particular claim. Another sin is that of irrelevance which distracts the consumers from pursuing a greener environment. A good example involves the abbreviation, CFCs, which basically contributes to Ozone pollution. The CFCs or chlorofluorocarbons have been banned for many years. Still, many products on the market use the following terms to capture the consumers: CFC- free insecticides and CFC free lubricants (North, 2006). Vagueness is also a sin committed in everyday advertisements.

The words used in many advertisements do not clearly explain what they actually refer to. The actual meaning is likely to be misinterpreted by the consumers buying the products. For instance, the phrases, “ chemical free” and “ non toxic” do not explain the product in its entirety. The sin of lesser of two evils applies to a limited scope of a product only. A particular product, for example organic cigarettes, insecticides and pesticides, may have wider

environmental impacts. The pesticides and insecticides can be used to kill the pests and insects that may cause environmental degradation.

On the other hand, the self same insecticides and pesticides have negative effects on the environment. Committing sin in the context of greenwashing involves making environmental claims that are false. Deep greenwash refers to the political effort to avoid democratic control of corporate behavior through a combination of PR and the lobbying muscle. At the Rio Earth Summit, greenwash went global, with a strategic attempt to portray not just individual corporations but business and industry as a whole as allies in the struggle to save the planet.

And, since these allies purportedly understood the world's problems and were working to resolve them, it was understood that no new regulations or monitoring programs would be necessary (Johnson, 2004). This massive public relations effort, complemented by a heavy dose of old-fashioned lobbying, worked. References to transnational corporations were made in the Rio texts, a report by the UN's Centre on Transnational Corporations was suppressed, and big business was generally left to do big business as usual. Some companies were going green to protect their reputations rather than being genuinely concerned for the environment.

If a recent UK survey is to be believed, FTSE 100 companies are more concerned with creating an eco-friendly corporate image rather than doing something to resolve environmental problems. When Chatsworth Communications surveyed 1, 200 opinion formers, only 1 per cent said that they believed that environmental policies were the result of genuine

concern. Respondents said that the main motivation for UK companies to adopt green policies was to protect their reputation (27 per cent); followed by consumer pressure (20 per cent); and good business sense (18 per cent) (Richman, 2001).

As economic globalization spreads, the world appears to be drowning in greenwash. There are countless companies that claim to be going green, although environmental degradation continues. This state of affairs was epitomized at the 1992 UN Conference in Rio when Secretary General Maurice Strong created an Eco-Fund to finance the event. During the almost 10 years since Rio, a parallel process has taken place, which has sidelined the agreements forged there and dissipated the energy that the Earth Summit had raised.

Through the process of globalization, transnational corporations have enormously increased their economic power in the last decade. They have also successfully resisted most environmental challenges to their core businesses, thereby maintaining unsustainable practices in the energy, chemicals, and agriculture, extractive and transportation sectors (Deal, 2000). Greenwash has additionally been used by politicians who intentionally commit the sins of greenwash when they are implementing government policies. They are known to use simple persuasive language so as to convince the citizens to accept the same.

The sin of vagueness is typically committed in the political arena when the politicians utter vague statements that are meant to convince and persuade the citizens. When there is a new policy to be implemented the politicians

often oversimplify the idea by just focusing on a particular advantage while disregarding the disadvantages (Stauber, 2001). A particular example can be drawn from the referendum of the constitution where the politicians pick out just one chapter or clause which is superior and generalize to claim that it is a good constitution.

They focus on that particular clause or chapter without considering the effects of the other clauses or chapters. Such politicians sometimes do win by default. In this process of convincing the audience the sin of irrelevancy may be committed by the politicians, however. Recommendations for Greenwash Awareness Many governments in different parts of the world have tried to discourage greenwashing under the ISO 14024 - the international organization for standardization which has established various guidelines for proper use of environmental information.

The consumers are, therefore, advised to look for evidence of any of the six sins of greenwashing. This can be done by gaining greater awareness of environmental issues. The consumers, once they are aware of greenwash, are likely to choose environmentally friendly products for their use. For this reason they might have to pay extra attention to the products in relation to their environment (Davis, 1992). The marketers should also understand that greenwashing has negative effects on their future market potential.

If the customers find out that they have been misled, the markets of numberless products would be lost. For this reason the marketers are encouraged to use more realistic adverts in order to have a longer stay in the market. Manufacturers also need to gain greater awareness of

environmental issues before they are able to manufacture environmentally friendly products. Indeed, manufacturers need to focus on the wider effects of their products on the environment before they produce them.

This will assist them in keeping the environment sustainable for our future generations as well. For this, manufacturers are required to be honest and realistic. This would help them in expanding market share at the expense of those rivals that are not involved in positive greenwashing. Going green is especially attractive if little or no additional expenditure is required to change performance; alternatively, a company may engage in positive greenwashing in an attempt to narrow the perceived green advantage of a rival (Tierney, 2007).

The Global Compact should be renamed the Global Accountability Compact and substantially redesigned. The redesign should make clear that it is not a partnership of allies that agree on all goals, and should clarify that the purpose of the Compact is not to support a liberalized trade agenda. The Compact should include provisions for monitoring of compliance with its Principles, and for public review of corporate case studies. Global Accountability Compact companies should commit to supporting the implementation of UN-brokered multilateral agreements (Rowell, 2001).

As the contemporary environmental movement built momentum in the mid-to-late 1960s, undermining the public trust in many a corporation, newly greened corporate images flooded the airwaves, newspapers and magazines. This initial wave of greenwash was labeled by former Madison Avenue advertising executive Jerry Mander and others at the time as “

ecopornography. " Certainly, greater awareness about positive and negative greenwashing would allow consumers to keep watch of the type of products they purchase as the marketers may be providing them with false information so as to make high levels of sales.

Conclusion Greenwash has been used in the corporate world to mean a friendly environment. Due to increasing competition for market share, the marketers have manipulated this to achieve their own goals at the expense of the environment. Greenwash on its own is a good policy that may be positively applied by advertisers and manufacturers. However, there remains a need for the marketers to make honest claims about the environmental impacts of their products so as to create a sustainable environment.