

# Greenwash

## Call It 'Corporate Eyewash'

Increased environmental and ecological concerns have prompted many organisations to reap unethical benefits, through a shortcut — Greenwashing, a term coined by New York environmentalist Jay Westerveld.



been also accused of illegally seizing lands of farmers and dumping toxic wastes on areas surrounding many of its bottling plants in India.

### What is Greenwash?

It is a disinformation disseminated by an organisation to present an environmentally responsible public image. An unjustified appropriation of environmental virtue by anybody, including an industry, corporation, a politician, a government or a non-government organisation (NGO), to create a pro-environment image, sell a product, service or a policy, or to try and rehabilitate its standing with the public or decision makers is 'greenwashing'. The term is used to describe the practice of spending significantly more resource(s) on advertising being green, rather than spending them on environmentally sound practices.

### Six Sins of Greenwashing

Six deceptive practices pointed out by Terra Choice, an American environmental marketing firm :

- 1. Hidden trade-off:** Many companies highlight one environmental aspect, ignoring the net impact of their product and the process. e.g. Many "energy efficient" goods contain hazardous materials, adding to e-waste.
- 2. No proof:** Products or companies claiming to be green, with no verifiable means, e.g. "certified organic" or "100 per cent eco-friendly".
- 3. Vagueness:** Unclear and unexplained marketing claims like "natural and chemical-free", etc., though they may contain naturally occurring hazardous substances like arsenic, formaldehyde, etc.
- 4. Irrelevance:** Claims like "CFC free" that are truthful but are unimportant and unhelpful in current scenario. CFC were banned more than 20 years ago.
- 5. Fibbing:** Products falsely claiming to be certified by Standards like Ecomark, Energy Star, etc.
- 6. Lesser of two evils:** Claims may be true but distract the consumer from greater evil and impact. e.g. Eco-friendly pesticide, organic cigarettes, etc.

### Examples

Many examples of greenwashing can be cited; here are a few of them:

- \* A consistent use of misleading and contradictory marketing campaign by Toyota, for which Consumers International (CI) conferred on it the "Greenscrubbing Award for environmental impact 2008". (For more, see *Corporate Giants Win Bad Company Awards*).
- \* The Coca-Cola company announced to become "water neutral", despite the fact that it continues to destroy water resources in India. San Francisco-based India Resource Centre charged the company with releasing untreated wastewater into surrounding agricultural fields and canals in Uttar Pradesh. The company has

- \* HCL Computers (India) talked on its website about striving to phase out toxic poly vinyl chloride (PVC) and brominated flame retardant (BFR), once economically viable solutions exist. *Greenpeace* termed it a "misleading greenwash". It reminded the HCL that it cannot evade responsibility by voicing vague aspirations, with no clear commitments to phase out all toxics and implement a free and easy take back system.

### Detecting Greenwash

However, a perfect litmus test for greenwash seems to be impossible. The *Greenpeace* has devised a four-point checklist, also called "CARE". A company which fails on any of the four CARE tests, may be in the greenwash list that includes:

- \* **Core business:** If it is based on an activity which is environmentally hazardous any assertion that it supports environmentally sustainable development is greenwash, e.g. coal and oil companies, whose products are identified source of man-made greenhouse gases.
- \* **Advertising Practice:** Using the media to make environmental claims about its cleaner product(s), while continuing practice(s) that negatively impact the environment, e.g. production or release of toxic matters.
- \* **Research and Development (R&D):** The extent to which the R&D budget of the company is utilised to develop environmentally sustainable practice is a measurement of greenwash, e.g. if a thermal power utility spends its R&D budget on reducing pollutant such as sulfur, ignoring the fact that any combustion of coal results in the emission of greenhouse gases, its R&D is not for sustainable ends. Development of renewable energy would do.
- \* **Environmental Lobbying Record:** Double-speak of companies on environmental issues, e.g. a company that advocates the cause of pollution reduction on one hand and lobbies against the policies meant to reduce pollution on the other.

### Spot Greenwash

- \* Be suspicious of all environmental claims.
- \* If someone is trying to sell their "green" credentials through large scale advertisement, look for the matters they are hiding.
- \* Check the environmental history of a company. Website of organisations like Greenpeace, Source Watch, Corporate Watch, India Resource Centre, India Environment Portal etc. may be of great help.
- \* Look out for poor use of scientific facts and terminologies like sustainable technology, emission offsetting, etc.
- \* Use your common sense and instincts to differentiate between right and wrong.

### Some important websites:

[Greenpeace.org](http://Greenpeace.org), [greenwashingindex.com](http://greenwashingindex.com), [stopgreenwash.org](http://stopgreenwash.org), [corpwatch.org](http://corpwatch.org), [thesietch.org](http://thesietch.org), [indiaenvironmentportal.org.in](http://indiaenvironmentportal.org.in),

