

The dangers of goodwashing and greenwashing

 By Leigh Andrews

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Sustainability Month means an increase in companies proudly stating their corporate social responsibility and CSI initiative success. But beware of tooting your company's 'good and green' trumpet if you're not quite there yet.

Green washing is a form of 'white washing' with an environmental angle. So instead of masking unpleasant facts in a political context, greenwashing implies your company has falsely conveyed social and/or environmental responsibility.

Heathrow airport is the latest to come under fire for this, with naysayers slating its proposed eco-sanctuary living wall or '[garden gate](#)' as merely masking its expansion plans, with a proposed new runway.



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While reports of greenwashing are on the rise it's nothing new, with [The Guardian](#) reporting that the trend has been around since the 1980s. Of course things have snowballed in the three-plus decades since then, with a shift from perhaps unintentional vagueness about how your brand is 'doing good' to now deliberately trying to crook the books and consumer favour with cause marketing that 'proves your brand cares'.

But it's a waste of time and effort, as [Forbes reports](#) that greenwashing doesn't fool anyone – employees or consumers alike, especially in the current [Age of Transparency](#). Just think of the outrage over [#dieselgate](#) and how it has tainted the reputation of various vehicle brands.

It's not just a global trend, either – back in 2009 we reported that as 98% of all 'green' claims made by companies and brands were guilty of one or more of the [seven sins of green washing](#), and in 2011 the [Ogilvy Earth South Africa Sustainability Survey](#) found that 85% of respondents would "boycott a company or brand if they suspected it was acting in an irresponsible or damaging way towards its people, its community or its environment."

Trend expert Dion Chang [points out](#) that locally we also have trends of blackwashing and goodwashing to steer clear of: Blackwashing being "companies that say they are BEE but are not", while goodwashing is "the perception that a brand is doing good, but in reality it is not".

So lots of greenwashing is also 'goodwashing'.

CSI projects don't equal sustainable brand

Another interesting finding in the survey was that many brands aren't aware that communicating their CSI initiatives should be separate to communicating the company's journey towards becoming more sustainable.

It could be as simple as stating you've already implemented a number of CSI projects that are still planned for the year. Or it could be as extreme as fibbing, using words like 'organic' or 'recyclable' when the product is far from it, or twisting the facts so it seems your acts have benefited the broader community when they've actually just lined your business wallet.

Whatever the case, there's no better time to re-examine your CSI projects and corporate communications for any hint of greenwashing.

Watch the CBC Marketplace video embedded below for examples of 'green and good' spin phrases to avoid in your marketing material if you don't have the empirical proof to back them:

ABOUT LEIGH ANDREWS

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