

9 Ways to Promote Sustainability without Greenwashing

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COMMUNICATIONS

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Why 9 Ways to Promote Sustainability without Greenwashing?

We want people to talk about their sustainability initiatives—we're all about encouraging people to buy more sustainable products and services. But some businesses are (legitimately) leery of raising the sustainability flag too soon, and many are not nearly leery enough.

Avoiding greenwashing is a genuine communications challenge. People are more skeptical than ever of green claims, and they have the means to call companies on overreach (Twitter, Facebook, ad infinitum). And while it's often easy to spot greenwashing when others are doing it, it's harder to see how your own communications will stack up under scrutiny.

Solving this problem is all about communicating credibly—our obsession. Drawing on our work on the Thinkshift Credibility Quotient™, as well as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) Green Guides released last fall, we've identified nine communications principles that can help you communicate about sustainability without worry.

Scrupulously,

The Thinkshifters

1. Act Right

If you're talking sustainability and walking in the opposite direction, you're greenwashing.

Why?

It prevents blowback.

If your actions are aligned with your words, you're less likely to be criticized.

It keeps you honest.

Minding your actions keeps marketing tied to operations.

It's the right thing.

Enough said.

Tips

Act first, talk later. You won't get precipitously out in front with your marketing.

Consider scale. How meaningful are your sustainability efforts in the context of your business?

Consider commitment. Is the whole company on board or is sustainability an island?

Many words came to mind when we read the Union of Concerned Scientists' June 2012 report, *A Climate of Corporate Control: How Corporations Have Influenced the U.S. Dialogue on Climate Science and Policy*. Let's just go with "dispirited."

The report showed that corporations twist science, spread misinformation, and use their influence to oppose climate change policy, even as they show off LEED-certified buildings, boast about carbon reductions in their supply chains, and undertake initiatives such as developing renewable energy.

Most of the 28 companies in the study were energy and petroleum companies and utilities; only eight were in other industries. That's obviously not a representative sampling. Still, they're far from the only ones to get caught promoting sustainability efforts while working against needed public policies or violating basic sustainability principles in other areas of their business. One egregious example: Dole claimed it had an unwavering commitment to environmental sustainability, but got hit with a lawsuit in late 2012 when a major banana supplier in Guatemala was found to be destroying wetlands and poisoning the water.

We know you wouldn't go that far, but sometimes even well-meaning companies promote their ambitions rather than their accomplishments. The lesson is simple: don't let the talk get ahead of the walk.

And if you're pursuing one greenish initiative while the rest of the business is oblivious to sustainability, you're not ready to talk about being green.

2. Be Accurate

Rigorous adherence to facts (no fudging) is fundamental—and not as simple as it might seem.

Why?

Your reputation matters. Inaccuracy will be perceived by many as lying or manipulation.

Trust is valuable. It's easy to lose but very hard to regain.

You'll avoid embarrassment. Getting called out in public is no fun.

Tips

Fact-check obsessively. Check every statement. Then check it again.

Be precise. If you're implying something untrue, then you're not telling the truth.

Be sure. Avoid speculation.

Accuracy is essential to credibility. Duh, right? Yet businesses and nonprofits miss the accuracy boat all the time. Even one or two innocuous slip-ups can cast a pall of doubt over your business. In Cone Communications' 2013 Green Gap Trend Tracker survey, 78 percent of respondents said they would boycott a product if they learned its environmental claims were misleading.

And remember the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report whose speculation on the melting rate of Himalayan glaciers brought forth a barrage of claims that all climate science is bunk? Sure, those reactions came from people who were, at best, climate science skeptics—but that's the point. Every business making a sustainability claim for its products or services faces skeptics.

The tricky part is that accuracy requires not only that you stick to the facts, but also that you avoid cherry-picking information in a way that creates an untrue impression. For example, the *New York Times* called foul on Growth Energy when the ethanol advocacy group implied that ethanol is ocean friendly when it blanketed a Washington subway station in the wake of the BP underwater oil spill with ads saying, "No beaches have been closed due to ethanol spills." The Times pointed out that U.S. ethanol is made primarily from corn, and fertilizer and pesticide runoffs from the Corn Belt are key contributors to dead zones in the Gulf of Mexico and along the Atlantic Coast. *Ouch.*

We can't speak to Growth Energy's intentions, but even the most ethical organizations sometimes fall into the cherry-picking trap: seizing on news events to draw attention to your benefits is smart communications, but you have to make sure any comparisons you make will stand up to scrutiny.

3. Keep It Relevant

Evidence should relate directly to the claim you're making.

Making a claim you really have to stretch to support? Think twice—you could hurt yourself that way.

Why?

The FTC says so. The Green Guides frown on irrelevant benefits.

Logic is our friend. Direct evidence makes intuitive sense.

You'll seem smart. Irrelevant claims can make you seem like a dunce (or a huckster).

Tips

If it feels dodgy, ditch it. You'll probably know in your gut if you're reaching too far.

Focus on strengths. The core aspects that make your product stand out are the ones to tout.

Start with the facts (rather than the claim). Then make the claim that the facts support.

To be credible, support has to be relevant. A companywide renewable energy program isn't support for positioning a household cleaning product as green—even if all your electricity is solar-generated. Nor is a promise that the product is free of some chemical that no product of its type contains. (This common type of irrelevancy is a variation on the old advertising ploy of highlighting some common product characteristic so that it appears to be a special feature—*Mad Men* fans will immediately flash on “Lucky Strike—It's Toasted.”) Boasting of a “great smell” won't cut it either.

Relevance is a theme throughout the FTC's Green Guides. The summary provides this advice on general environmental claims: “When a marketer qualifies a general claim with a specific benefit, consumers understand the benefit to be significant. As a result, marketers shouldn't highlight small or unimportant benefits.”

In other words, if it's not truly relevant, don't brag about it.

4. Get Certified

Credible third-party certification can be a highly effective way to say you're the real thing.

Why?

It's a quick hit. If people respect the label they'll know at a glance that you meet their standards.

It's a foot in the door. Corporate purchasing policies often make certifications mandatory.

It's not just your word. An outside expert is attesting to your claims.

Tips

Difficult is good. A label that anyone can get proves only that you can fill out a form.

Poll your market. Research how familiar the label is to your audience.

Don't make it up. Inventing a label will only make you look ridiculous when people get wise.

A seal indicating you've met a set of standards can be a quick route to customer confidence—but only if it's recognized and verifies that you've met serious standards.

At our last check, the Ecolabel Index was tracking 435 eco-labels in 197 countries and 25 industry sectors. We're going to go out on a limb and guess that many of these stamps of approval are little more than graphical greenwashing—or, at best, Greek to your customers.

Credible eco-labels signify third-party verification based on well-defined guidelines and standards. Excellent examples include B Corporation for companywide sustainability (Thinkshift is certified), and William McDonough's Cradle to Cradle, the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), and Scientific Certification Systems for products. Others don't pass the sniff test. The Marine Stewardship Council, for example, certifies fisheries as sustainable when they merely promise to improve.

If you invest in an eco-label (and they can be costly), make sure the certifying organization is well respected in your sector and clearly communicates what the standards are and how it verifies compliance. That information then needs to be passed on to purchasers in an easily understood, digestible form. This is where communication often breaks down, so be prepared to educate your customers about what the certification means for your business and products, even if the label is one your customers know.

5. Prove It

Nothing stands up to scrutiny like evidence

Why?

It counters skepticism.

Proof will often convince doubters. (Not always, as we've seen with climate change denial).

It allows comparison.

You're the best, right? This lets people see that.

Because you can. Why hide your investment in testing?

Tips

Limit your claims. That gives you a clear message and reduces your list of proof points.

Focus on clarity. Make sure your points make sense to the average person.

Cite authorities. Third-party verification is most persuasive.

This simple rule may be the shortest cut to avoiding greenwashing: no proof, no claim. It's not enough to have the evidence in your back pocket, though—you have to cite it, along with the claim. And asking people to read a white paper or hunt for data buried on your website won't cut it.

Of course, as anyone who's ever sat through a trial knows, the evidence can take a long time to sum up. It's obviously not practical to provide voluminous detail everywhere you make a claim (on packaging, for example), but you should provide the essential detail with enough information so that people can look it up. For example: "50 percent lower smog-forming emissions compared with conventional fuels, based on EPA testing."

Totting up your proof points can also be a challenge when you've assessed many product attributes (good!). Here's the FTC's advice:

"Marketers can qualify certifications based on attributes that are too numerous to disclose by saying, 'Virtually all products impact the environment. For details on which attributes we evaluated, go to [a website that discusses this product]'" Our caveat: the URL you provide should take customers straight to the relevant information.

6. Be Clear

Fuzzy language fails to make your case—and can be read as greenwashing.

Why?

People like straight talk.

When you're clear, you sound trustworthy.

Clear claims are verifiable.

Even if people don't double-check your claims, it's reassuring to know they can.

You want people to get it.

It's hard to persuade when people don't know what you're talking about.

Tips

Test your language with people who know nothing about the topic.

You are not the audience.

Remember—most people don't know your professional jargon.

Keep it simple. Be concise.

Brevity tends to enforce clarity and cut through clutter.

If people can't understand what you're saying, how can they understand how great your products and services are?

Jargon and fluffy language—phrases only a scientist could grasp, insider lingo, and meaningless marketing puffery—at best will baffle your audience. At worst, it will raise suspicions that you're greenwashing. That's because unclear language can obscure the truth or contain no discernible meaning.

Here's an example from a Canon ad that ran a few years ago: "Sustainability is our standard for measuring CO₂ reduction." Huh? How can sustainability be a measurement standard? It goes on to say: "One Canon energy-saving technology has reduced CO₂ emissions by an estimated 8.4 million tons, enough to melt more than 13 million cubic meters of ice." (There's a big photo of a glacier in Patagonia.) That draws a picture of cause and effect where none exists—Canon implies that its CO₂ emissions reductions have (or could have) saved 13 million cubic meters of glacier. (And if you take the sentence literally, Canon's emissions reductions have caused the ice to melt.)

Most people are confused enough about the mechanics of climate change and its effects without corporate marketers adding to their puzzlement.

7. Mind the Context

Claims that float free from any grounding information can be confusing—and seem inaccurate or irrelevant.

Why?

Clarity demands it. Most claims need context to make sense.

It inoculates you against charges of misleading.

It helps you get a bigger, clearer perspective on your initiatives.

Tips

Anticipate questions. If someone might ask, “Compared to what?” answer that.

Accept a small victory. If your benefit is only a benefit to some, be honest about it.

Explain the unfamiliar. People should understand what your claim is based on.

Context is a close friend of accuracy and relevance. Sustainability achievements need context to be meaningful and credible, and benefits claims should be true in real-world situations.

When citing carbon emissions reductions, for example, consider how the reductions in one area compare to your business’s overall emissions and how they relate to the product at hand.

A claim such as “uses 25 percent less harmful chemicals” is meaningless if you don’t say less than what, and it’s irrelevant if the original amount was minor to start with.

Claims also have to be applicable to reality. For instance, it’s not kosher to simply slap a “recyclable” label on packaging that can be recycled only at specialized facilities. Once people find out their recyclables can’t actually be recycled, they tend to get peeved—and massively distrustful. The context solution is simple: “This product may not be recyclable in your area.”

8. Be Specific

Detailed statements can be checked—and that makes them more trustworthy.

Why?

It's more persuasive. Details can be checked.

It builds trust. Vague statements sound shifty.

It enforces discipline. The need for details combats marketing laziness.

Tips

Ask: can we prove it? If you can, do; if you can't, be quiet about it.

Count the ways. List all the ways your product is green; hang your hat on the strongest.

Avoid hype. It probably won't help, and it's embarrassing.

To be credible, claims first have to be provable (that's why provability is a highly rated factor in the Thinkshift Credibility Quotient™). And broad claims are difficult, if not impossible, to substantiate, as the FTC's Green Guides note. The guides frown on general environmental benefit claims like "green" or "eco-friendly" and advise marketers to qualify general claims with "clear, prominent, and specific" environmental benefits.

At Thinkshift, we get cranky about silly boasts like "world's best" and "greenest" (especially with comparisons to ungreen products or practices). Not only are these statements unprovable, they're used so often they're meaningless.

We've heard the argument that these kinds of claims are "just marketing," and people know they're hype. That's true, and that's the point. Why would you want to teach your customers to think of your marketing as hype? That means you're encouraging them to discount everything you say or conclude that it's all just B.S.

Our advice: make the strongest statement you can support, be specific, and back it up.

9. Curb Your Enthusiasm

Claiming you have the silver bullet for [insert huge problem here] makes you a target.

Why?

It raises the bar too high. Say you're going to save the world, and no one's impressed if you just save a town.

It's catnip to skeptics. Professional critics like nothing better than an easy teardown.

People might believe you. Once. If you don't deliver, they won't make that mistake again.

Tips

Stick to the facts. Only claim what's true right now.

Be judicious. With external audiences, talk about hopes, not certainties.

Be media savvy. Make sure anyone who is interviewed sticks to the facts.

So you think you have the solution for a problem that's been vexing people for decades—well then, you rock. But maybe you should keep that belief to yourself for a while.

People trying to turn an innovative sustainability technology into a market-leading product or service often develop a religious fervor: theirs is the one true path to salvation. That spirit can be great for maintaining organizational morale and motivating everyone to forge ahead through tough times. But it's bad marketing.

Our sustainability challenges are enormous and fast moving, and the reality is, there's probably not a single solution to any one of them. When you say you have a silver bullet—the one thing that's going to solve all our problems—you're more likely to raise doubts than inspire converts.

Why? "I have the one best way" is an impossible claim to prove (at least until you've realized your dream), and it invites skeptics to pick your solution apart. Besides, we've all heard these boasts from others whose solutions didn't pan out.

Maintaining credibility with outside audiences may require disciplining your enthusiasm a bit. "Under promise and over deliver" is still good advice.

➤ See more strategy>Shift guides and learn about the Thinkshift Credibility Quotient™ on the [Resources](#) page of our website. Or [sign up](#) to be the first to know about our next report.

Thinkshift is a San Francisco–based boutique marketing agency that creates strategic communications programs that help sustainability-oriented enterprises succeed. We tell clients' stories in ways that motivate audiences and get them the attention they deserve. Follow us [@thinkshift](#).