



Business Talking Green

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Red herrings, rose tinted spectacles or blue sky thinking?

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I'm a sociologist and an environmentalist. Sociologists and environmentalists often think that marketing and advertising is basically evil. It's marketing and advertising that make consumerism sexy after all. And consumerism, we are told, is destroying the planet.

I also work in marketing. Marketers often think that sociologists and environmentalists are basically idiots – they've got no idea about the 'real world'. And the 'real world', we're told, is where things actually get done.

A big part of my PhD research at the SCI is about how business talks about environmental issues. Business talking green has introduced a new word to the English language – 'greenwash' – short for environmental whitewash. It means talking green to cover up for the fact that you're not doing green. Greenwash boils down to two strategies: red herrings and rose tinted spectacles. Greenwashers either highlight a claim that's misleading in the wider environmental context or tell us a feel-good story to cover something else up. I'm interested in the extent to which business talking green is greenwash – or real blue-skies thinking.

There's a lot of cynicism among consumers about green claims made by business. At the same time forward thinking brands are taking sustainability very seriously. But if consumers can't tell the difference between greenwash and genuine sustainability commitment, brands doing the right thing won't be rewarded. And that undermines the business case for sustainability.

Just before I started my research I was at an event for all the brand and marketing people of a major blue chip company. The Head of CSR addressed the room and said: 'Marketing is responsible for making excessive consumption 'sexy' – it's now the responsibility of marketing to make a sustainable lifestyle sexy.'

A few weeks later I was delivering a presentation at a conference on 'Green Marketing'. My environmentalist friends assumed this was a conference on 'How to do greenwash'. In reality what everybody was talking about was 'How not to do Greenwash'. A common theme from the marketing people was how to convince the rest of the organisation that doing greenwash was a recipe for disaster. As green marketing guru John Grant puts it: 'You can't put a lettuce in the butcher's shop window and claim you've gone vegetarian.'

Brands have to be seen to be authentic to win consumers' trust. Companies that have done the sums, like [Unilever](#), know that a big part of the environmental impact of their business comes from people using their products.

Looking out beyond the business to see how sustainability can be embedded in customers' lives is one way to communicate a genuine commitment to sustainability.

Can marketing and communications "make a sustainable lifestyle sexy"? That is a very big question. My research suggests that they have a vital role to play. The strategic objectives of sustainability initiatives are hugely communication-reliant and engaging consumers is crucial if brands want to realise the value of sustainability.

Let me know what you think:

As someone working in sustainability: Does it matter that we all agree on what sustainability means?

As a communications manager for a brand: How do you avoid greenwash?

As a consumer: What does a genuine commitment to sustainability look like to you?