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# Green Wash- Creating a Seduced Environmental Image

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## ABSTRACT

*This article is an attempt to highlight the ways by which today's organisations are trying to attract people by making false claims about environment and trying to brainwash the minds of the customers by projecting an environmentally conscious organisation. The attempt to become environmentally responsible organisation is not bad but the modes of projecting to be environmentally responsible when its activities are damaging the environment needs to be checked. The article is a modest attempt to highlight how organisations are advertising their products and are misleading the innocent consumers to maximise their profits.*

## I Introduction

The concern of the society for natural environment and drive for making a "Green Earth Business" has led to emergence of "Green Activities" that include Green Marketing, Green Advertising, Green Products, Green Purchasing, Green Supply Chain and Green Shopping. Everyday we see advertisements showing lush green forests, pristine streams glimmering in the sunlight; stunning birds' flying high in the sky and all these advertisements are photographed beautifully and consumes lot of company's wealth.

On one side where organisations project themselves as environmental friendly; their activities and basic business damages the environment very badly. This is another side of the coin, which needs to be highlighted. In fact, it is the world's most polluting corporations that have developed the most sophisticated techniques to communicate their message of corporate environmentalism. These

activities have given rise to a new concept called **Green Wash**. Green wash is defined as the phenomenon of socially and environmentally destructive corporations attempting to preserve and expand their markets by posing as friends of the environment and leaders in the struggle to eradicate poverty. (Earth Summit biz Academy).

## II. Forms of Green Wash

### 1. Blue wash:

"Blue wash" refers to corporations that wrap themselves in the blue tag of the United Nations in order to associate themselves with UN themes of human rights, labour rights and environmental protection. (Earth Summit biz Academy).

### 2. Sweat Wash

These organisations which use child labour on one

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hand and try to divert attention from their factory practices by announcing social welfare programmes and human right awards are said to be indulged in sweat wash. (www.foei.org)

### 3. Deep Green wash:

Behind the green public image, there is a deeper corporate political strategy to get the government's permission to allow organisations to frame voluntary codes of conduct, win-win partnerships and best practices learning models, rather than binding legislations and regulations. Deep Green wash occurs behind the scene and is very difficult to recognise. (www.foei.org)

## III Ways to identify Green Wash

**1. Seduced environmental image advertisements:** - The simplest form of green wash is the environmental image advertisement. Here a company places its product in natural setting. No specific environmental claims are made but the advertisers feel that there will be subconscious association of the organisation with natural beauty in the consumer's mind.

**2. Impress you with their environmental projects:** - Here the company tries to project the work they have done to save the environment, the studies they have funded and how responsible they are towards the society. One must find out the project cost they have funded and then the cost incurred by the organisation to publicize it. If the cost of publicizing it is more than the project cost, it is a Green Wash.

**3. Distract your attention from their destructive products :** - Sometimes a company calls attention towards its safety records and reduction in polluting emissions. Most of the thermal power generating organisations and automobile manufacturing organisations do this. These things are fine (if true) but they do not address the destructiveness of the company's core business itself. Automobile companies and their products generally harm the environment.

**4. Try to gain sympathy by focussing on "YOUR" solutions :-** Quotes like Air conditioners with Health Air System keep the air in your room free of smoke, dust particles and even smaller pollutants is a sure

way of gaining sympathy of consumers by showing concern for them but what about the gases they use in their air conditioners which are responsible for global warming. Clearly, this is also a green wash.

**5. Avoid regulations by claiming they will solve the problem themselves:** -A corporate executive's personal fondness for nature and commitment to future generations is irrelevant if his main concern is shareholders and profit. If the company suggests endless delays and self-regulations as the solution, it is a Green Wash.

## IV. Some Foreign Cases of Green Wash

- British Petroleum, the world's second largest oil company and one of the world's largest corporations advertised its new identity as a leader in moving the world "*Beyond Petroleum*". It spent its forty five million dollars for the purchase of the largest Solarex Solar Energy Corporation showing that it is environmentally responsible but at the same time British Petroleum will spend five billion dollars over five years for oil exploration in Alaska alone. This activity may damage the environment.

- Shell the world's third largest oil company boasts of its commitment to renewable energy sources and features photos of lush green forests but Shell spends a miniscule of 0.6% of its annual investment on renewable. Thus in true sense, Shell's actions do not match its words.

- Monsanto, Dow, Dupont, Zeneca and BASF launched the "Council for Bio-technology information", in April 2000. The Council will spend up to 250 million dollars over three to five years to win public approval for genetically engineered foods under the slogan "*Good Ideas Are Growing*"; thus tampering with nature and its creation. (Earth Summit biz Academy).

## V. Some Indian Case examples of Green Wash

A leading refrigeration company started advertising their product 'Quick Chill refrigerator' stating that in their quick chill model harmful gases used in normal refrigerators have been replaced by environment friendly ones. This has been a violation of ISO 14021 guidelines (See Appendix I) and is also a misleading advertisement because the hydro fluoro carbon (HFC-

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134a) gas which is being used in the refrigerators has a global warming potential.(www.cuts.org)

A leading automobile manufacturing company has introduced four stroke engine bikes, which are fuel efficient but calling smoke producing machines-environment friendly will not be correct. The company claims them to be environment friendly, which is again misleading and a green wash. (www.cuts.org). Another company claims of producing environment friendly bike.

The two examples cited above clearly show that most of the automobile manufacturing organisations whose products damage the environment claim to be environment friendly.

A leading international car manufacturer makes a claim of making every car not just Euro Compliant but also environment friendly at every possible level, telling the customer that they don't use CFC in air conditioning, they use recyclable plastic, Asbestos free brake and clutch pads and environmental friendly paints. Such claims are mere violation of 14021 guidelines as no claims can be made about the products that are not being used. So, if CFC is not being used, one should not make any statement about it. (See Appendix I)

## VI. Conclusion

The cases cited above are few but everyday we can see organisations making claim of being environmentally responsible and that they care for it. According to Kurnets' Curve, pollution have a very strong and positive correlation with economic growth. Pollution is bound to increase as India moves into the category of developed nations but it becomes the responsibility of every organisation to protect its environment and not make false claims to promote and advertise their products simply to increase their market share and profits.

## APPENDIX-I

### ISO 14021 GUIDELINES

1) **Banned Claims:** The following types of claims are banned by the standard:

- **Vague, non specific claims:** The standard

gives the following examples of the sorts of claims that are vague and should not be used:

i) Environmentally safe ii)Environmentally friendly iii)Earth friendly iv)Non-polluting v)Green vi)Nature's friend vii)Ozone friendly.

- **Claims of .....“free”:** Where the claims are based on absence of ingredients never associated with the product, have been banned. For example, CFC free, land free etc.

- **Claims of achieving sustainability:** Such claims should not be used because parameters to measure such claims do not exist.

2) **Specific requirements for environmental claims:** The ISO standard lists a large number of specific requirements for claims. The standard states that claims must be:

i) Accurate and not misleading ii) Substantiated and verified iii)Relevant to that particular product only iv)Unlikely to result in misinterpretation v)Clear as to which part of the product it applies to. The standard states that a claim shall not be made under the following circumstances:-

- No claim shall be based on ingredients or features, which have never been associated with that product category.

- It should not be put in a way that implies there are multiple environmental benefits from a single improvement.

- It shall not exaggerate the environmental aspect of the product.

- It shall not be made if it is likely to be misinterpreted, even though it is true.

3) **Definition of Terms:** The ISO lists a number of terms commonly used in environmental claims that it defines as follows:

- **Compostable:** These claims must be clearly qualified as to where and how the composting will take place.

- **Degradable:** Claims must only be made in relation to a specific test method that states that maximum level of degradation and the duration of the test.

- **Extended product life:** This should be treated as a comparative claim, so the basis for comparison must be qualified and specified.

- **Recyclable:** The claims shall be accompanied by information where the appropriate collection facilities are situated.
- **Recycled Content:** The Standard sets out the following requirements for claims about recycled content: i)Where a claim of recycled content is made, the percentage of recycled material shall be stated ii)The percentage of recycled content for products and packaging must be stated separately iii)Use of a symbol is optional iv)When a symbol is used, it must be the Mobius Loop with a percentage value
- **Reduced energy consumption (in use):** Claims for reduced energy consumption shall be based on the reduction in energy consumption in the use of products or delivery of services and not in the manufacturing process.
- **Reusable, refillable:** These terms can only be used when the product can be reused for its original purpose, and where facilities or a programme exist to allow this to happen.

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