
GREENWASH GUIDE

This guide to recognising environmental window dressing comes from Corporate Watch's *Exposing Corporate Greenwash Activist Tool Kit*(www.corpwatch.org/).

You've seen the ads. Lush green forests. Stunning birds of prey in flight. Humpback whales breaching. Pristine streams glimmering in the sunlight. All photographed beautifully and reproduced at great expense.

But something is a little off. Somewhere on the page, sometime on the screen, you see the tagline:

At Fossil Fuels Are Us, Inc.,
We Care.

Ever since the environmental movement got serious at the first Earth Day, some of the biggest polluters and biodiversity destroyers have been trying to divert us. Telling us, in pious tones, how much they care about the earth and would never do anything to harm it. The world's most polluting corporations have developed some sophisticated techniques to communicate a message of corporate environmentalism.

And since the world's governments have gotten serious about climate change, Greenhouse Greenwash has been among the most prevalent variations of greenwash. On the 30th anniversary of Earth Day, in recognition of the twin themes of Energy and Climate Change, we offer 6 ways to identify and respond to Greenwash.

Seduce you with image ads

The simplest form of greenwash is the environmental image advertisement. Here a company name, like Phillips Petroleum, or a product, such as a gas guzzling SUV, is placed in a gorgeous natural setting. No specific environmental claims are made, but the advertisers hope the feel will rub off on the consumer, a subconscious association of their company with natural beauty.

Antidote: If natural beauty has nothing to do with the company's products, it's greenwash. Mute the TV (or turn it off), turn the page quickly, and write to the company explaining why you feel it is inappropriate to associate gas guzzling cars and the roads they use with preserving nature.

Impress you with their environmental projects

Here the company gets more specific. They talk about how many acres of wetlands they've preserved. The studies of biodiversity they have funded. The endangered species that roost on their properties.

Antidote: Find out about the projects in question. Sometimes they are forced upon the company by regulators due to past violations, and only later presented as voluntary. Find out how much the project cost, and compare it to the cost of the ads to publicize it. If the ads and the air time cost as much or more than the project, it's greenwash.

Distract you from their destructive products

Sometimes a company will call attention to its improving safety record, or reduction in polluting emissions, or energy-efficient factories. These things are all fine (if true), but do not address the destructiveness of the company's core business itself.

Antidote: Focus on the product. If the main product of the company is still lead, nuclear energy, asbestos, nasty pesticides, organochlorine chemicals, or fossil fuels, it's greenwash.

Gain your sympathy by focusing on YOUR solutions

Some polluting companies employ PR firms so talented at co-opting environment rhetoric you'd think they invented it. These corporations are some of the most powerful institutions in

the world. So it is tempting for us to believe they now agree with us, since they really could help solve the problems we face.

Antidote: Study their actions, not their words. If Shell or BP Amoco tell us they are committed to solar power and fossil fuel use must be reduced, look at how much they spend on new fossil fuel development. If it dwarfs their investments in renewable energy, it's greenwash.

Avoid regulations by claiming they will solve the problem themselves

A common form of greenwash is to claim deep personal and business interest in environmental solutions while simultaneously lobbying to avoid regulations. A variant of this is the ad which rationalizes opposition to regulations by inventing or exaggerating economic costs.

Antidote: Remember, 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-regulation as the solution, it's greenwash.

Tug at your heart strings with their concern for the world's poorest people

Many corporations are major culprits in human rights violations and contributors to inequality around the world. So it is perhaps natural that they are pioneers of a new shade of greenwash, advertising and rhetoric not around ecological protection but around anti-poverty programs, development and human rights. Oil is not the only industry involved in this deception, take a look at tobacco giant Philip Morris' ad on hunger.

Antidote: Communicate with communities in the United States and abroad that know first hand of the disrespect some of the companies are capable of: Texaco and ARCO in Ecuador, BP in Alaska, Chevron and Shell in Nigeria, UNOCAL and TOTAL in Burma, and all of their companies in the US. If the company is complicit in human rights violations, it's 'Rightswash'.



a colour version of this image and others referred to in the text are on the online version of this pack: www.babymilkaction.org/spin