



GOING GREEN

WITHOUT
GREENWASHING

A GUIDE TO RESPONSIBLE AND EFFECTIVE
COMMUNICATION ON SUSTAINABILITY CHALLENGES

Preface _____ **2**

What is greenwashing _____ **3**

**Examples of well-known
companies that have been
accused of greenwashing** _____ **4**

**7 common forms
of greenwashing** _____ **5**

**List of DON'Ts when
communicating sustainable topics** ____ **7**

**Anticipate potential issues
in advance** _____ **9**

**Count on sceptics, deniers
and strong reactions** _____ **9**

**Transferring knowledge from
theory to practice** _____ **10**

**x
e
p
o
r
t**

Preface

It is no secret that sustainability is a challenging topic from a communication point of view. **The public has high expectations** and at the same time responds critically to any slip-ups. In addition, environmental and social topics are a bit like football – everyone seems to know everything about them and everyone has their own opinion. Sometimes even one that is not supported by scientific findings.

When communicating sustainability, we are continuously exposed to critical monitoring of our words and actions. On one hand, **we are under the scrutiny of the activist-minded part of the public** with high expectations and demands, which, despite our best intentions, are sometimes difficult to meet in full. On the other side of this heavily polarised public debate, however, we are subject to **harsh opinions from deniers of climate** change and other environmental challenges.

When it comes to environmental topics, we must therefore always **expect critical voices**. Even the most well-thought-out and elaborate communication or advertising campaign is very unlikely to avoid at least some critical opinion.

Sometimes criticism is, of course, **justified**.

If a company carries out a campaign in which it underlines its environmental commitments, while at the same time its product is responsible for large amounts of greenhouse gas emissions, some public outrage is probably the best outcome that company can hope for.

This short guide provides insights and tips to help you **avoid the most common pitfalls when** marketing and advertising environmental topics. It is intended for all who address sustainability challenges with a sincere desire to do something good for the environment and society.

What is greenwashing

Companies that are accused of greenwashing do so for different reasons. Even if we start from the economic assumption that the goal of every company is to maximise profits, greenwashing is not always driven by financial motives alone. **Sometimes the reason can also be completely harmless**, such as being trendy or doing what everyone does.

Greenwashing is giving a false impression or misleading information about how the company's products, services or business are environmentally friendly.

Greenwashing means making unsubstantiated claims to mislead consumers or business partners into believing that products, services or businesses are "green" or that they have a greater positive impact on the environment than is actually the case.

Regardless of the incentive for a campaign that could be accused of greenwashing by the public, it is good **for the image of the company or brand** to avoid communication that could trigger such criticism.

Sometimes **a single word**, which the public in a given context understands differently than the campaign designer, is enough for a negative response.

So even if the intention is sincere, an ineptly designed communication part of a marketing or advertising campaign can lead to accusations of greenwashing that a company or brand will not be able to shake off for a long time.



Examples of well-known companies that have been accused of greenwashing

The accusations of greenwashing were **largely justified in these cases**, as companies consciously addressed customers, the public or business partners with their environmental claims in such a way that they would believe in their sustainable operation.



In the US, **Volkswagen** advertised diesel engines in its vehicles with the slogan “Clean Diesel”, even though they had built-in software that allowed them to cheat on emission tests. ([Source](#))



Greenpeace accuses **Coca-Cola** of greenwashing in the field of single-use plastic bottles. Instead of abandoning environmentally harmful plastic packaging, they designed a campaign to advertise the transition to transparent bottles that should make recycling easier. ([Source](#))



Fast fashion brands **H&M and Zara** are often the targets of accusations of greenwashing. According to critics, consumer programmes that give the impression of caring for the environment (buying back old clothes, recycling clothes, using renewable energy) hide the true face of fast fashion, which is considered to be one of the biggest polluters of the planet. ([Source](#))



Furniture company **IKEA** has come under fire for using wood from illegal logging in Russia. The case would not be as high-profile if IKEA, on the other hand, did not go to great lengths to communicate and advertise its sustainable practices. ([Source](#))



Starbucks has phased out the use of single-use plastic straws. But their new solution is even more problematic from an environmental point of view - the straws have been replaced by drinking caps that contain even more plastic. ([Source](#))



7 common forms of greenwashing

In order to avoid greenwashing in marketing and advertising, it is good to know what its most common forms are. The list below does not cover all possible forms of misleading communication on environmentally relevant topics, but highlights 7 common ones, some of which can also **inadvertently** sneak into communication messages.

Conveniently leaving something out on purpose

When communicating a product or service, we conveniently forget to mention some of its characteristics that are not exactly green.

Example: The producer advertises that the fruit is produced in an environmentally friendly way, giving the consumer the impression that by buying it they will be helping to preserve the environment, while at the same time concealing the fact that it has been transported from the other side of the world.

Making claims for which there is no evidence

When communicating, we make claims that are not supported by verifiable and/or scientifically valid data.

Example: The manufacturer advertises that the use of a certain material in production reduces water consumption by 30 percent, which cannot be independently verified.

Using broad statements

In our communications, we use statements that are technically true, but just broad enough that they are likely to be misinterpreted by the customer.

Example: The manufacturer states that the product contains only natural ingredients, so it is environmentally friendly. But natural does not necessarily mean green. Natural ingredients can also be obtained in an environmentally harmful way.

Misleading labels

This form of greenwashing is most often present in graphic form. This is the case when a badge or other distinctive graphic element is used to give the impression that a product has a certain certification or attested attribute, when in reality no such attestation exists from a credible third party.

Example: The product packaging bears the label "Compliant with our environmental commitments", which is not awarded by any independent organisation and cannot be verified by the customer at the point of purchase.

Making environmental claims that already apply to everyone

When we want to emphasise the benefits of a product or service, one of the claims may be one that actually applies to all products of a certain type. In practice, this is one of the more common *inadvertent* forms of misleading or creating the impression that a particular product is greener than others.

Example: If diesel fuel were advertised as containing up to 7% biodiesel, such a claim would in reality be irrelevant, as the biodiesel content is already stipulated by the EN590 standard, which all sellers of petroleum products are required to comply with.

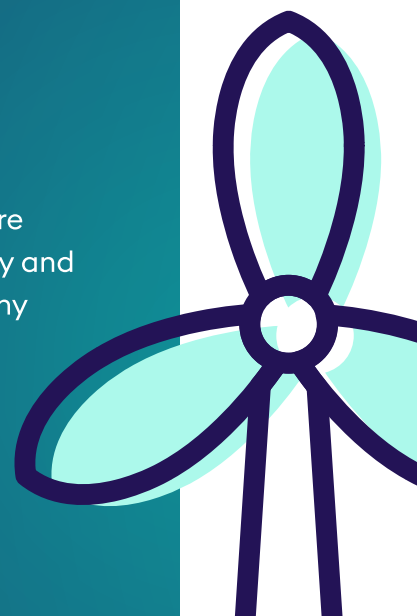
Relativisation of harmfulness

Relativisation of harmfulness is used when we want to emphasise a good feature in order to hide another, harmful feature of a product or service. Customers may get the impression that this makes the product more environmentally friendly, although overall its adverse effects still prevail.

Example: While the claim that a new car with 5% lower fuel consumption is more environmentally friendly is not misleading, it is undoubtedly a relativisation of harmfulness, as 5% lower fuel consumption cannot mask other proven harmful effects on the environment.

Lying

The last of the common forms of greenwashing probably does not require any special explanation. Making statements that are not true is ethically and professionally inadmissible and harmful to the reputation of the company and the brand already in the medium term.



List of DON'Ts when communicating sustainable topics

Many of the slip-ups in communicating sustainability challenges can be avoided with careful thought. In the world of marketing and advertising, it is often the case that things **should have been done yesterday**, but when it comes to topics of environmental and social responsibility, it is really not good to afford misunderstandings, mistakes or (unintentional) misleading the public.

If you are not sure how your message will be received by the public and whether it will be understood in the same way as you understand it, **test it**. You can begin with a group of colleagues who are not actively involved in the campaign, and later move on to a small group of friends, acquaintances and relatives. Their feedback is valuable insight into how your campaign will be perceived “out there”.

In the case of digital marketing, you should of course also take advantage of **A/B testing** on a smaller group of recipients, which is possible with most digital marketing tools.

As communicating sustainability issues is a very specific field, where not only the knowledge but also the experience of the marketing and advertising professionals involved is very helpful, we advise working with those individuals and/or agencies that can demonstrate relevant **references and certifications** in the field of sustainability.

If you are going to communicate sustainability achievements, social responsibility or environmentally friendly products or services yourself, here are **4 things you should avoid in any case**.

DON'T EXAGGERATE

It's a fact of life that when we describe our products or services, we are quickly overwhelmed with enthusiasm, excitement and pride. There's nothing wrong with that! But since the public can be very sensitive when it comes to sustainable topics, try to be **as objective as possible**. Do not exaggerate claims or use too many superlatives, especially if you cannot support them with credible evidence.

DON'T GENERALISE

We all know that ... Well, there are very few things that we all know about – let alone agree on. When communicating responsibility towards the environment and society, avoid making generalised claims. Because there will very likely be someone who will **point the finger at some exception** in an attempt to prove that none of what you say is true.

DON'T MAKE CLAIMS "OFF THE TOP OF YOUR HEAD", DON'T INVENT FACTS

It is difficult enough to stress how important it is to communicate only what you can support with appropriate sources and evidence. Even then, there may be someone who disputes your sources and evidence. A single unsubstantiated claim can absolutely crush your campaign.

DON'T MISLEAD

This should be self-explanatory, but sometimes it isn't. It can also happen that misleading is completely unintentional, for example due to insufficient verification of information. Regardless of whether the misleading is intentional or unintentional, it can have negative consequences for the public image of a company, brand or product.

ALWAYS MAKE SURE YOU CAN BACK UP YOUR SUSTAINABILITY CLAIM WITH SOURCES AND EVIDENCE.



**THE MORE GROUNDBREAKING,
UNUSUAL, OR ABSOLUTE A CLAIM
IS, THE STRONGER EVIDENCE YOU
NEED TO GAIN PUBLIC TRUST.**

Anticipate potential issues in advance

What is already good to keep in mind is even more important when communicating sustainability issues. When designing a green marketing or advertising campaign, anticipate possible problems in advance.

What can you expect on social media? **How will you respond to negative comments?** Is it possible that your campaign will reach the media, where it will not be presented in the way you would like?

All this is good to consider at the campaign planning stage in order to avoid any future problems. **It is better to prevent a fire than to put it out.**



Count on sceptics, deniers and strong reactions

Environmental issues often **polarise the public** and can cross ideological and political divides. Skepticism, denial, strong reactions and the orchestrated efforts of informal interest groups are something that should always be counted on.

With appropriate communication strategies, approaches and **thoughtful choice of words**, you can reduce the possibility of your campaign triggering controversy and negative reactions on social networks, online forums, video platforms, blogs, as well as in the actual public space.

YOUR MESSAGES SHOULD ADDRESS POSITIVE EMOTIONS.

AVOID MAKING CLAIMS OR STATEMENTS THAT ARE POLARISING.

Transferring knowledge from theory to practice

In addition to theoretical knowledge, everyday practical experience is indispensable for communicating sustainable topics.

Knowledge of the technological and content possibilities of advertising channels, **monitoring of social sentiment and current events** in the field of sustainability, linguistic and graphic creativity and accurate measurement of results are indispensable factors for the success of a (digital) marketing or advertising campaign.

Even if you decide to run the campaign yourself, it is recommended that, at least at the beginning, in the design phase, you take advantage of the help and advice of sustainable marketing (ESG) experts who will give a constructive assessment of your ideas and **concrete advice** on how to achieve the desired result in practice.

**SUSTAINABLE
TOPICS HAVE
THEIR OWN
PECULIARITIES.**

**MAKE SURE YOU'RE
WORKING WITH
PEOPLE WHO
KNOW THEM WELL.**



Madwise – ESG Marketing Experts

At Madwise, we are among the pioneers in sustainable digital marketing. We are the first digital agency in Slovenia with a **Green Star certificate** and signatories of the Slovenian Advertising Chamber's 100% commitment to sustainable advertising standards.



**CUSTOMERS
ARE WILLING TO PAY
MORE FOR PRODUCTS
AND SERVICES WITH
SUSTAINABLE
STORIES.**

**WHAT IS YOUR
SUSTAINABILITY
STORY?**

We can also help you effectively spread the word about your sustainability achievements, products and services.

Contact us at zivjo@madwise.si.

**GET TO KNOW OUR WORLD:
[MADWISE.SI/ESG-MARKETING](https://madwise.si/esg-marketing)**



SOURCES

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345979220_High-tech_green-washing_how_the_VW_Dieselgate_changed_the_consumer_perspective_A_qualitative_analysis

<https://www.greenpeace.org/aotearoa/press-release/coca-colas-latest-greenwashing-an-attempt-at-disguising-its-biggest-polluter-status/>

<https://earth.org/fast-fashion-brands-greenwashing/>

<https://www.nbcnews.com/science/environment/ikea-likely-sold-furniture-linked-illegal-logging-forests-crucial-earth-n1273745>

<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2018/jul/23/starbucks-straws-ban-2020-environment>

<https://www.ucc.ie/en/eri/news/here-are-the-7-sins-of-greenwashing.html>