

Greenwashing & Its Negative Effects

Here's how greenwashing harms global sustainability

Greenwashing is the practice of making false or misleading claims about the environmental benefits of a product or service.

This can take many forms, such as exaggerating the recyclability of packaging or making claims about a product's biodegradability without providing evidence to support them.

Greenwashing can be used by companies to make their products seem more environmentally friendly than they actually are, in order to appeal to consumers who are concerned about the environment.

The term "greenwashing" was first coined by environmental activist Jay Westerveld in 1986.

How Can I Recognise Greenwashing?

Recognizing greenwashing can be challenging, as companies use a variety of tactics to make their products appear more environmentally friendly than they actually are. However, there are a few signs to look out for that can indicate greenwashing:

1. Environmental claims that are vague or difficult to verify, such as "eco-friendly" or "all natural."
2. Environmental claims that are not supported by any evidence, such as certifications or third-party verification.
3. Environmental claims that are not relevant to the product, such as promoting a product as "carbon neutral" when the carbon footprint of the product is not significant.

4. Environmental claims that are misleading, such as promoting a product as "recyclable" when it can only be recycled in certain facilities or conditions.
5. Environmental claims that are not compared to a standard or have no context, such as "biodegradable" without providing information on how long it takes to break down.
6. Environmental claims that are not consistent with the company's overall environmental impact.

It's also worth noting that a product can be environmentally friendly without advertising it. A consumer who wants to be sure of the environmental impact of a product, could research the company's environmental policies, look for certifications, or consult independent sources such as consumer reports or environmental organisations.

The 6 Types Of Greenwashing

Greenwashing can be broadly categorised into 6 different types on the basis of context.

1. Green Crowding

Hiding amongst a "crowd" of other corporations can keep environmentally damaging approaches hidden. For example, the 'Alliance to End Plastic Waste: Barely Credible' report is an example of how companies can be seen to be doing something collectively, but individual actions still lack.

2. Green Lighting

Corporations shine a spotlight on green credentials in order to draw attention away from environmentally damaging activities. Examples include

manufacturers showcasing decarbonisation even as plastics pollution and resource use expands.

3. Green Shifting

This is when companies try to shift the blame up or down the value chain, usually toward consumers.

4. Green Labelling

Marketing departments mislead the masses through their adverts by claiming something is green, however, their words are often false and misleading.

5. Green Rinsing

This occurs when companies regularly change their climate targets and Environment Sustainability Goals (ESGs) before they've been achieved. For Example

6. Green Hushing

Finally, greenhushing refers to corporations under-reporting or even hiding their sustainability data and performance to avoid stakeholder scrutiny.

How Does Greenwashing Harm Global Sustainability Efforts?

Greenwashing can be harmful in a number of ways:

1. **Misleading consumers:** Greenwashing can mislead consumers into thinking they are making more environmentally friendly choices than they actually are. This can lead to consumers overpaying for products that are not as environmentally friendly as they believe.
2. **Discrediting genuine environmental efforts:** Greenwashing can make it more difficult for truly environmentally friendly products and companies to stand out, as consumers may become sceptical of all environmental claims.
3. **Diverting attention from real environmental issues:** Greenwashing can distract from more pressing environmental concerns and prevent meaningful progress in areas where real action is needed.
4. **Encouraging complacency:** Greenwashing can make it easier for individuals and businesses to feel that they have done enough to address environmental issues, when in reality more needs to be done.
5. **Undermining regulations:** If a company is greenwashing its products, it can be difficult for regulators to identify and address environmental issues.
6. **Furthering environmental degradation:** Greenwashing allows companies to continue their unsustainable practices while promoting a green image to consumers, this can lead to further environmental degradation.
7. **Supporting unjust practices:** By promoting products that are not as environmentally friendly as they seem, greenwashing can support

companies that engage in environmentally harmful practices such as deforestation, pollution, and exploitation of natural resources.

Is There A Solution?

There are several solutions that can help to address greenwashing:

1. Increase transparency: Consumers need accurate and complete information about the environmental impact of products in order to make informed choices. Companies should be required to provide clear and verifiable information about the environmental impact of their products.
2. Strengthen regulations: Governments should strengthen regulations around environmental claims made by companies, and enforce penalties for companies that make false or misleading claims.
3. Develop independent certifications: Independent third-party certifications can help to verify environmental claims made by companies, and provide a way for consumers to identify truly environmentally friendly products.
4. Educate consumers: Consumers need to be educated about the potential for greenwashing, and taught how to recognize it. This can be done through advertising campaigns, educational materials, and other awareness-raising efforts.
5. Hold companies accountable: Companies need to be held accountable for their environmental impact. This can be done through legal action, consumer boycotts, and other forms of pressure.
6. Encourage companies to adopt sustainable practices: Encourage companies to adopt sustainable practices and policies through financial incentives, regulations, and other means.

7. Encourage collaboration: Collaboration between companies, governments, and NGOs can help to promote sustainable practices, and prevent greenwashing.
8. Keep an eye on the industry: Keep an eye on the industry developments, new technologies and regulations to be able to adapt and know what to expect.

Conclusion

Overall, addressing greenwashing requires a combination of government regulation, consumer education, and industry self-regulation. By working together, we can create a more transparent and sustainable marketplace, where consumers can be confident that the products they buy are truly environmentally friendly.