

Greenwashing: White Paper Document

greenwashing /grēn'wōsh'īng, -wōsh'-/

noun

1. The dissemination of misleading information that conceals abuse of the environment in order to present a positive public image.

Abstract:

This whitepaper explores the phenomenon of greenwashing within the candle industry, a sector increasingly scrutinized for its environmental and health implications. Greenwashing, the practice of falsely portraying products as environmentally friendly, is a growing concern as consumers become more conscious of their ecological impact. This paper aims to unveil how candle manufacturers, particularly those using paraffin wax and synthetic fragrances, mislead consumers through greenwashed claims. It examines the environmental and health risks associated with commonly used candle materials and the deceptive marketing strategies that obscure these risks. The discussion extends to the broader implications of greenwashing in undermining genuine environmental efforts and consumer trust.

Introduction:

As global awareness about the impact of individual choices and purchases grows, numerous businesses are also adopting more sustainable practices to appeal to environmentally conscious consumers. Ideally, this trend is positive, but unfortunately, some companies only project an image of sustainability, while their operations still contribute to waste and greenhouse gas emissions. This practice is known as 'greenwashing'. So, what does it mean, and how can you identify, and steer clear of companies that are guilty of it?

By examining case studies, scientific findings, and current market trends, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of greenwashing. It seeks to equip consumers with the knowledge to discern genuine eco-friendly products from greenwashed ones and encourages the industry to move towards more transparent and responsible practices.

What Is Greenwashing?

Greenwashing is the process of conveying a false impression or misleading information about how a company's products are environmentally sound. Greenwashing involves making an unsubstantiated claim to deceive consumers into believing that a company's products are environmentally friendly or have a greater positive environmental impact than they actually do.

In addition, greenwashing may occur when a company attempts to emphasize sustainable aspects of a product to overshadow the company's involvement in environmentally damaging practices. Performed through the use of environmental imagery, misleading labels, and hiding tradeoffs, greenwashing is a play on the term "whitewashing," which means using false information to intentionally hide wrongdoing, error, or an unpleasant situation in an attempt to make it seem less bad than it is. (Investopedia, 2023)

Where does the term "greenwashing" come from?

The term "greenwashing" was coined by environmentalist Jay Westerveld in 1986 in an essay criticising the irony of the "save the towel" movement in hotels at the time. He noticed the vast amount of waste he had come across throughout the rest of the hotel, where there were no visible signs of efforts being made to become more sustainable. He said that instead, the hotel was simply trying to reduce costs by not having to wash towels as much but while trying to market it as being eco-friendly. (Earth.org, 2022)

How Greenwashing Works

Also known as "green sheen," greenwashing is an attempt to capitalize on the growing demand for environmentally sound products, whether that means they are more **natural, healthier, free of chemicals, recyclable, or less wasteful of natural resources**. (Investopedia, 2023)

Some of the world's biggest carbon emitters, such as conventional energy companies, have attempted to rebrand themselves as champions of the environment. Products are greenwashed through a process of renaming, rebranding, or repackaging them. Greenwashed products might convey the idea that they're more natural, wholesome, or free of chemicals than competing brands. (Investopedia, 2023)

Companies have engaged in greenwashing via press releases and commercials touting their clean energy or pollution reduction efforts. In reality, the company may not be making a meaningful commitment to green initiatives. In short, companies that make unsubstantiated claims that their products are environmentally safe or provide some green benefit are involved in greenwashing. (Investopedia, 2023)

Why Do Companies Engage in Greenwashing?

It's simple – being seen as ethical drives profitability. A report by McKinsey found that Gen Z (people born roughly between 1996 and 2010) are more likely to spend money on companies

and brands seen to be ethical. Another, Nielson's Global Corporate Sustainability Report, found that 66% of consumers would spend more on a product if it comes from a sustainable brand, and that jumps to 73% among millennials. Therefore, companies have a financial incentive to be more socially conscious, or at least appear to.

However, another reason that companies engage in greenwashing is far less insidious – they simply don't know that they're doing it. Many companies just don't have the expertise to know what is truly environmentally beneficial, and what isn't. In Australia, a company switched to using "biodegradable" plastic, which technically didn't fully degrade, but instead just breaks down into smaller parts unless it's processed in a digester specifically designed to create the conditions for biodegradation. What the company actually needed was a compostable bag, which is a different thing entirely. The consumer affairs watchdog in the country actually fined them to stop selling the product as it was completely false.

It is very likely that this company intended to be eco-friendly, but was caught out due to their lack of research on what actually constitutes as sustainable materials. **This is why it's so important for companies to do meaningful research on how to be sustainable and apply it to all stages of their operations, not only what consumers see.** (Earth.org, 2022)

What Are Some Examples of Greenwashing?

Unfortunately, there are many examples of organisations engaging in greenwashing. A classic example is Volkswagen, who admitted to cheating emissions tests by fitting various vehicles with a "defeat" device, software which could detect when it was undergoing an emissions test and altering the performance to reduce the emissions level. All of this was while it was touting the low-emissions and eco-friendly features of its vehicles in marketing campaigns. In actuality, these engines were emitting up to 40 times the allowed limit for nitrogen oxide pollutants.

Another is the fossil fuel giant BP, who changed their name to Beyond Petroleum and put solar panels on their gas stations, and then came under fire for their green misdirection.

In 2018, Nestlé released a statement saying that it had "ambitions" for its packaging to be 100% recyclable or reusable by 2025. However, environmental groups were quick to point out that the company hadn't released clear targets, a timeline to accompany its ambitions or additional efforts to help facilitate recycling by consumers. Greenpeace reacted to this by releasing its own searing statement, in which it said, "Nestlé's statement on plastic packaging includes more of the same greenwashing baby steps to tackle a crisis it helped to create. It will not actually move the needle toward the reduction of single-use plastics in a meaningful way, and sets an incredibly low standard as the largest food and beverage company in the world." **In 2020, Nestlé, along with Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, were named the world's top plastic polluters for the third year in a row.**

Finally, in 2017, Walmart paid USD\$1 million to settle claims that it sold plastics misleadingly touted as being eco-friendly. In the US, California state law bans the sale of plastics labeled as

“compostable” or “biodegradable,” as environmental officials have determined such claims are misleading without disclaimers about how quickly the product will biodegrade in landfill.

Half of the world’s disposable plastic has been produced in the last 16 years, and 91% of the plastic produced globally is not recycled. This is why companies making claims to be making “reusable plastic” are so harmful – we need to be creating less plastic. It’s all well and good to be creating plastic that is recyclable but the above statistics show that this is meaningless if this plastic is still going to end up in a landfill. Many types of plastic are difficult to recycle, either because countries don’t have the necessary machinery or because people simply don’t have the time/ will to recycle their goods.

Fortunately, some countries are starting to crack down on marketing that greenwashes. In 2019, Norway’s Forbrukertilsynet (Consumer Authority) ruled last year that fast fashion brand H&M was under investigation for its supposedly ethical ‘Conscious’ collection. H&M and other fast fashion retailers are renowned for exploiting the vagueness of green terminology to appear more environmentally conscious and sell more clothes. This is a problem, because fast fashion is one of the biggest polluters on the planet, with more than £140 million worth of clothing ending up in UK landfills every year. (Earth.org, 2022)

How Can You Spot Greenwashing and Avoid It?

- Watch out for “fluffy language,” ie. words or terms with no clear meaning (eg “eco-friendly,” “produced sustainably,” “natural” etc)
- Declarations from a company that it is slightly greener than the rest, even if the rest are pretty terrible (eg. *BP placing solar panels on its gas stations and saying that it is “working to be more sustainable”*)
- “Greening” dangerous products to make it seem safe (eg, “eco-friendly” cigarettes)
- Using jargon or information that only a scientist could check or understand
- Providing no proof of a claim
- Presenting totally fabricated claims or data as fact
- Emphasising one tiny green attribute when everything else is dirty (eg again, BP and their solar panels)
- Companies that aren’t transparent or open, and don’t admit to making mistakes

(Earth.org, 2022)

Greenwashing and Candles

In recent years, the candle industry, like many others, has found itself navigating the complex waters of environmental responsibility and consumer expectations. With an increasing global emphasis on sustainability, some candle manufacturers have responded by adopting greener practices. However, many concerning trends have evolved from it.

Widely used paraffin wax, a by-product of crude oil refining, poses significant environmental and health concerns. Despite its popularity due to its low cost and ease of use, paraffin wax is neither sustainable nor eco-friendly. It contributes to greenhouse gas emissions and indoor air pollution. **Yet, many candle brands continue to use paraffin wax while marketing their products as 'eco-friendly' or 'natural,' a classic case of greenwashing.**

Fragrances: while consumers often associate scented candles with wellness and relaxation, the reality is that many of these products release volatile organic compounds (VOCs) and other harmful substances, affecting indoor air quality and posing health risks. **Brands that emphasize the 'natural' scents of their candles without disclosing the potential hazards of synthetic fragrances are engaging in greenwashing.**

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