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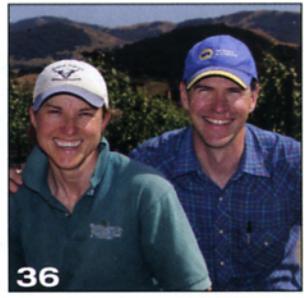
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Moving beyond greenwashing to create authentic eco-success.

By *Patricia Dines*

Everywhere we turn, it seems we're bombarded with ads for green products, services, political candidates, ballot measures and more. How on earth can we identify the ones we want to support while dodging the greenwashers—those coated only with a superficial green veneer to coax us out of our hard-earned money and votes? More important, how do we accurately describe our own company's level of green without overstating it and risking the wrath of the green-savvy marketplace?

These concerns quickly lead to one vital but daunting question: What does "green"

actually mean? Sure, we all have a sense that it implies walking lightly on the earth. But when we look for specifics, we hear a baffling variety of passionately stated opinions and definitions, ranging from simple actions that seem too small to make a difference to impossible standards that surely few could meet.

So, to help clear up the confusion, we decided to distill what you need to know to steer around the greenwashing hazards and take actions that meaningfully contribute to the eco-changes our culture so urgently needs to make.

Recognizing greenwashing's various forms

It's not just our imagination that green claims have increased. A study by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing found that eco-ads almost tripled between 2006 and 2008, and the average number of green-labeled products per store nearly doubled between 2007 and 2008.

This increased attention reflects the good news of people's growing desire to "do the right thing." According to a 2007 survey by the Natural Marketing Institute (NMI), 58 percent of Americans are more likely to buy products and services from a company that's mindful of its impact on the environment and society than from one that isn't. This is a compelling reason for companies to mention green among their products' benefits.

However, while this trend gives the environmental good guys long-deserved attention for their positive offerings, it also attracts the wannabes who hop on the bandwagon solely for its marketing advantages.

Janet Pomeroy, founder and president of San Francisco's green marketing firm The goodMix (www.thegoodmix.com), says, "Some companies assume they can just throw a green sticker on anything and say, 'I'm green'—with no proof, no certification, no one to check them on it."

For instance, Pomeroy remembers a Chevy Tahoe TV ad that she felt "was complete greenwashing. I mean, just because the SUV can drive around in the mountains doesn't mean it's green," she observes with a laugh.

Some of greenwashing's various faces are described in TerraChoice's 2009 report "The Seven Sins of Greenwashing" (www.sinsofgreenwashing.org). Transgressions identified include: being vague, making irrelevant claims, emphasizing one eco-aspect of a product while ignoring much more harmful ones, presenting false or misleading certification, and overtly lying about the facts.

Other ways that companies can greenwash, notes the nonprofit Greenpeace (www.stopgreenwash.org), are by portraying baby steps as giant strides, exaggerating an environmental achievement to deflect attention from its environmental problems, bragging about court-ordered actions as if they were voluntary expressions of corporate values, and touting a green image while company lobbyists work tirelessly in Washington, D.C., "to gut environmental protections."

For more specific greenwashing examples, Pomeroy suggests perusing www.greenwashingindex.com.

The costs of greenwashing

The result of this frequent dissonance between green image and reality, according to NMI's 2007 report, is that 70 percent of American consumers think companies aren't always genuine when claiming to help the environment and society. This increased skepticism can dilute the value of the word "green," undermining its usefulness for identifying effective eco-actions, and decreasing public participation in earth-healing activities.

False claims can also inaccurately persuade customers that they've



Janet Pomeroy of The goodMix

False claims can inaccurately persuade customers that they've made a contribution when their action actually had little effect.

made a contribution when their action actually had little effect. Plus, it makes it harder to identify the authentic offerings, penalizing rather than rewarding those who are doing it right.

Even worse, all this green noise and misinformation can undermine the environmental movement's momentum at a time when it's essential that we all participate in constructive and meaningful ways. Thus, Pomeroy observes, "our culture becomes less receptive, more cynical, more likely to think this is all environmental hooey and not believe things like climate change—which is not what we need right now."

Greenwashing also often harms the company making the claims. Pomeroy cautions that the threat of being labeled a greenwasher "is a really big deal," especially in this era of social media. "You're going to lose credibility and, consequently, market share." Other risks include diminished employee satisfaction and retention rates, and even legal trouble.

On the flip side of the equation, Pomeroy notices the marketplace confusion can make some companies reluctant to mention their green features, "because they don't want people to say, 'Oh, you didn't raise the bar high enough.'"

Buying green wisely

The first place we usually face greenwashing is when we're purchasing products and services, so here are some essential tips for being a smart green consumer, both individually and as a business.

Learn the definitions of the most common eco-words to understand what they do and don't mean. Recognize that some words, such as "organic," have strong legal definitions, while others, such as "green" and "sustainable," have no definition in law and thus mean different things to different people. Additionally, the credibility of private certifiers varies widely. Identify the criteria and standards that are most important to you and your industry. A great source for understanding eco-labels is www.greenerchoices.org/eco-labels.

Recognize that no company or product in our modern world is completely ecological, because our culture is so complex and interwoven. Instead, items are just more or less green, based on specific measures. Pomeroy muses, "It's more accurate to be called a 'greener' company than a green company, since any large use of resources has an impact on the environment."

Choose products and services that articulate, and offer evidence for, specific green criteria. Ken Kurtzig, founder and CEO of Marin's iReuse (www.iReuse.com), a sustainability consulting firm, says, "It's a business' responsibility to be honest and accurate in its green claims. But when a company makes vague statements like, 'We're super green,' then we, as consumers, need to demand more details—ask them *why* they're 'super-green.'"

Look below the surface. Don't just accept unsupported vagaries such as a nature scene on a label or the word "earth" in a brand name. Avoid offerings that don't clarify specifics, and choose those that best



Ken Kurtzig of iReuse

inform you of their meaningful details.

Go beyond buying replacement green products to greening your activities. For example, you might start by buying recycled paper towels, but later choose to be even more earth-nurturing by shifting from disposable to reusable towels, thus reducing the related production and disposal impacts. Similarly, while it's great to seek green features if you're already building a new office or buying a new company car, the greener choice is usually to improve the efficiency of an existing building or reduce the miles traveled in your current vehicle, thus more fully leveraging the eco-costs that have already been paid.

Authentically marketing your company

The other crucial time for businesses to sidestep greenwashing is in their own marketing. Certainly, there are potential advantages to joining the green trend, including matching competitors' offerings, attracting new customers and expanding into new markets.

However, to reap those benefits and avoid greenwashing's pitfalls, it's vital to be authentic and transparent when talking about green features. Tell the truth and make specific, meaningful, honest claims. Then back them up with facts and evidence, including third-party certification when possible. Most important, walk your talk throughout your company. Don't just have green be something you *say*; have it be something you *do*.

Your key steps to a truly greener company

Create a clear statement of your company's green mission, even if it's just for internal use. This helps you clarify your motivations, inspire your staff and keep your bearings among the many theories and action options you'll find.

Determine your priority criteria and current status on each one. There's a wide range of ways a company can be green, so identify your own greatest environmental impacts first and then prioritize your sustainability-related projects based on the greatest environmental, financial and social impact. Kurtzig recommends starting with your business' biggest impacts: "Don't waste your time on a bunch of stuff that won't contribute significantly to your overall impact." Prioritizing helps increase your odds of early success, which is essential for receiving continued support for your project.

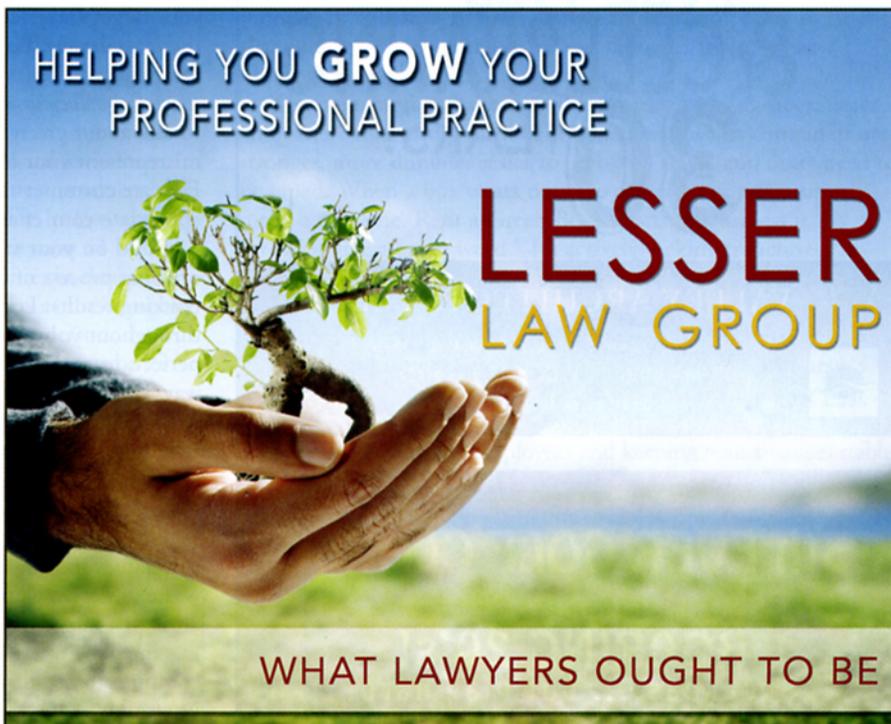
Most businesses, especially smaller ones, can often identify their largest impacts simply by brainstorming with a

whiteboard and a copy of their budget, he advises. Medium and large businesses probably need a more organized program, perhaps with assistance from a sustainability consultant.

Kurtzig also emphasizes the importance of simultaneously assessing environmental, financial and social impacts. Using this "triple bottom line" helps ensure your actions provide a net positive benefit for both your organization and the community. For example, he says, companies often want to start greening by putting solar on their roofs, expecting it to save money and be attractive to customers.

However, Kurtzig demonstrates that improving building efficiency should come first, for both financial and ecological reasons. (See "Solar Isn't the Answer," Green Scene, June 2010.)

Gather essential information from experts and stakeholders. A wide variety of resources is available to assist you in creating and implementing your plan, including financial incentive programs to help with funding. Also talk with your employees, customers, investors, board and so forth, about what you're considering, and invite their input. This will help you understand their values and



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priorities, receive helpful ideas, refine your approach and create a sense of inclusion in your final plans.

Set specific targets and create structures for meeting them. Integrate your eco-objectives into your current organizational goals and structures. Designate a person or group as responsible for leading the project. Explore ways to involve employees, such as through cross-departmental green teams, employee education programs and annual performance reviews. Consider getting third-party certification from a reputable program to increase credibility while simplifying logistics and marketing. Also confirm that your legislative activities are consistent with your claims.

As you produce meaningful results, convey the specifics in your public communications. Be sure that your ads, packaging, websites, menus and such avoid vague green terms and instead describe the specific criteria you meet and their particular benefits to the earth. Consider which aspects will be most compelling for your target audience. Understand eco-word definitions to use them accurately. Learn the laws regarding green claims by reviewing the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) Green Guides at www.ftc.gov/bcp/grnrule/guides980427.htm. Teach employees how to talk about green features appropriately, so they don't misrepresent your organization and damage your credibility. Educate customers about what your claims mean to help them appreciate your efforts.

Build on your success. Green is not a static end-state, but an ongoing process of improvement. Continue setting goals and tracking results. Look for ways to encourage green values throughout your company's culture. Aim to be committed, not perfect, learning from your experiences and having fun along the way. Pomeroy finds that, once folks start making even simple changes, they want to keep doing more "because it feels good and they start getting excited about it."

Progressing from green beginner to pioneering leader

While each business has its own green style and journey, many companies start by trimming energy and water use and reducing waste, observes Kurtzig, because these usually also cut costs. Other areas first targeted might include high travel expenses (by finding less-intensive alternatives), high paper use (by shifting to a computer-based document sharing system), and toxic materials use (to lower the risks to workers and relieve regulatory burdens).

Once a company has some traction on these elements, the next stage for many is to expand beyond their onsite operations to assess and reduce the lifecycle impacts of their business—from the first extraction of each material they use to their own products' final fate. Through this exploration, companies can encourage positive change in their suppliers, more fully use the resources embedded in their products and reduce total waste.

The third stage that some businesses get to in their greening process is even more exciting: They start seeing their mission and operations through green eyes and, from this, deeply rethink and restructure how their company serves customers, workers, the planet and the bottom line.

Inspiring examples

The classic example of this visionary corporate rethinking is the Atlanta-based carpetmaker Interface, Inc. (www.interfaceglobal.com). In 1994, founder and Chairman Ray Anderson was being prodded by customers to offer eco-options, so he read Paul Hawken's seminal book, *The Ecology of Commerce*. He experienced what he calls a "spear in the chest" moment, realizing both the significant harm that businesses do to the planet, and the necessity and opportunity for companies to lead us in a new direction.

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“Regardless of whether a business is an Internet retailer in California or a tool-and-die shop in Cleveland or a software company in India, the reconciliation of the relationship between human—in this case, business—and living systems will dominate the 21st century.”

—Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins and L. Hunter Lovins, *Natural Capitalism*

So he challenged his staff to start creating ways to shift the company from harming the earth to restoring it. By comprehensively redesigning the company's operations and products across the board, Interface has since cut its fossil fuel use 45 percent, trimmed greenhouse gas tonnage 82 percent and reduced water use in its carpet tile business by 75 percent. It's diverted 148 million pounds of carpet from landfills and obtains 27 percent of its energy from renewable sources, with a target of 100 percent. The company's next goal is eliminating all of its negative eco-impacts by 2020.

Interface's efforts have been financially beneficial as well. Through its eco-improvements and innovative new products, the company has saved more than \$336 million since 1995—and doubled its profits. *Fortune* magazine named this now \$1 billion corporation one of the “Most Admired Companies in America.” In 2009, Interface was again voted by eco-experts as the company with the highest commitment to sustainability. Anderson concludes that being green “doesn't cost, it pays”—in customer loyalty, employee enthusiasm and cold hard cash.

Another pioneering eco-leader, says Pomeroy, is Rent a Green

Box (www.earthfriendlymoving.com/greenbox) in Southern California. This “zero-waste, cradle-to-cradle” company turns waste plastic from landfills into reusable moving boxes that are designed to last for 400 uses, compared to the one or two uses we get from cardboard moving boxes. The company rents its boxes to individuals and businesses by the week, delivering them in trucks that run on “waste vegetable oil and biofuel.” It also offers innovative recycled packing materials.

The company's website describes its service as “cheaper, faster and easier” than using cardboard boxes, because its containers are stronger, more durable, easier to grab and stack, and don't need to be taped. When a box wears out, the company grinds it up to make a new one. Rent a Green Box reports its business is “growing like a green weed.” It's actively seeking franchisees in other regions.

These examples show the excitement and bottom line results that a deep green vision can bring. They also demonstrate the importance of “getting it right” in other areas of your business, including developing a smart strategy, knowing and serving your market, offering quality products and customer service, constructively engaging employees and keeping your finances stable.

Resources

The **Bay Area Green Business Program** provides free eco-checklists as well as the option of official recognition (www.greenbiz.ca.gov).

The Green Business Guide, by Glenn Bachman (2009), walks readers through the specific steps for greening a company. “A one-stop resource for businesses of all shapes and sizes to implement eco-friendly policies, programs and practices.”

The Ecology of Commerce, by Paul Hawken (1993), has inspired many with its profound vision of an ecologically sustainable economy.

Natural Capitalism, by Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins and L. Hunter Lovins (1999), describes what capitalism can look like when natural and human resources are valued equally with money.

B corporation is a new kind of corporate structure designed to encourage success in the triple bottom line of financial, ecological and social criteria (www.bcorporation.net).

Creating a greener future

Pomeroy believes that “every company has a chance to be leading this in some way.” She also feels it's crucial for businesses to do that, “because some of the biggest problems we have right now have to do with our environmental situation. I mean, if we don't have the resources, we're not going to be making *anything*. If we have polluted air, we're not going to be able to live. If we don't have an environment, we're not going to have businesses. And if we don't support environmental initiatives and legislation, we're going to live in a very different world. It's coming down to survival issues.”

Her conclusion is that, “you have to step up and say, ‘I have a company that's going to change the way we relate to the environment, and here's how we're going to do it.’ And you have to be honest about it, create the benchmarks and be authentic about where you are in the journey. *That's* leadership.”

Companies that make this bold choice are doing more than making money, creating business opportunities, serving customers and contributing to a better future. They're also helping shape our evolving collaborative understanding of what green really means. ■

Patricia Dines has been a professional writer and public speaker for 25 years, and has specialized in environmental topics for the past 15 years. She consults with businesses, is the author of the syndicated “Ask EcoGirl” column, and has written a wide variety of helpful eco-books, newsletters, articles and more. For more information, see www.patriciadines.info or call (707) 829-2999.

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