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The green screen

Florence Reeves-White on why we should be wary of manipulative marketing



It's not uncommon for people to use the internet as a means of painting a modified version of themselves onto a blank canvas. It would be unnatural to choose the least attractive photographs of yourself to show off your physical appeal on a dating app, wouldn't it? However, it seems that it may be more than our looks that we're bluffing about, and Tinder users may not be alone in their efforts to polish their public persona.

It's apparent that hundreds of corporations across the globe are clocking on to the fact that it's not trend-worthy to trash the planet. The question is: are they genuinely dedicated to sustainability, or are they projecting an ethical image of themselves onto the green screen of a manipulative marketing campaign?

Have you ever picked up a 'health' bar and actually read through the information on the packaging? After wading through a forest of earthy colours and buzz words such as 'natural' and 'organic', you'll often find that the fat or sugar content won't be a far cry from that chocolate bar you were eyeing up by the checkout. This process – of corporations consciously deceiving consumers about the environmental sustainability of their product – is known as 'greenwashing'.

Making a product, brand or service appear to be more healthy, natural, recyclable or generally sustainable, is simply a marketing ploy for many organisations – and it's working. It may be easier to trundle along, assuring ourselves that our £3 bargain winter beanie hat is cruelty-free, but it's important to wake up and smell the (dubiously Fairtrade) coffee.

So, why are they trying to convince us otherwise? In short, big corporations have seen an opportunity to capitalise on a shift in priorities for the consumer.



Over the past decade we have become far more concerned with where our food comes from, how our clothes are made and the biodegradability of its packaging.

In fact, according to *Nielson's 2017 Global Consumer Confidence Survey*, a whopping 81 per cent of global respondents feel strongly that companies should help improve the environment (nielson.com). The survey also found that this passion for corporate social responsibility is shared across gender lines and generations. Millennials, gen Z and gen X are the most supportive, but their older counterparts aren't far behind. On average, consumers in the health and beauty industry are willing to pay the greatest premium for ethical products (dectech.co.uk).

In order to become more appealing to the growing community of conscious consumers, many organisations are producing marketing materials which attempt to herald them as some sort of eco-friendly federation. Cast your mind back to Volkswagen's 'clean diesel' advertising campaign. The vehicle manufacturer had set out to debunk the concept of diesel being altogether bad, and claimed to have invented technology to ensure their diesel cars emitted fewer pollutants than competitors'. It later transpired that Volkswagen rigged 11 million of its diesel cars with technology designed to cheat tests, which ultimately undermined the trust of the public.

“Big corporations have seen an opportunity to capitalise on a shift in priorities for the consumer”

This is not an isolated anecdote. Thousands of companies wear a sheen of green in the public eye. What is perhaps fairly unique about the Volkswagen narrative is that they were called out for creating a ruse. Unfortunately, there's nothing illegal about greenwashing. Companies are allowed to use phrases such as 'all-natural' without any official approval. This means that it's up to us as consumers to research and investigate the institutions that we hand our cash over to.

Viewing a conscience about the environment as a trend or fad to profit from is, for obvious reasons, extremely dangerous. Aside from the fact that it betrays the trust of those who are genuinely trying to make a positive impact on the planet, it also detracts from the status of sustainability as a lifestyle, rather than merely a passing proclivity.

So, what should you be looking out for when making judgements on which organisations you should show support for? Here is a basic guide for navigating ecological transparency in the services you pay for:

- See past the packaging – When it comes to the products themselves, always make sure you read the fine print. Do you feel more inclined to buy into branding that employs images of the natural world? Admittedly, it's challenging to prevent our subconscious from internalising the notion that these products are less harmful to the planet than their boldly-lettered and offensively-coloured counterparts. We're sure you've heard it before, but it's essential to remember that not everything does what it says on the tin.
- Look for certification certainty – If a company makes its products or services sustainably, they will boastfully flaunt any certifications, so they shouldn't be tough to find. The most salient ones are ECOCERT and Fairtrade, which are certification bodies both unequivocally dedicated to sustainable development. Phrases such as 'certified' and '100 per cent organic' should only be taken seriously when backed up by evidence and supporting information. Quite often this jargon is thrown around by businesses who are self-proclaimed conscious producers. >



• Beware suspicious price tags – It can be tough to turn down a bargain. We can all admit to getting a little giddy when we see an item of clothing we like for an affordable price, but it's fighting the impulse to shove armfuls of cheap clobber into the trolley that's important. 'Conscious collections' of clothing are on the rise, but have you ever questioned why such lines are necessary? How are these brands producing the rest of their products, and should we be buying into a conscious clothing line from a brand that employs sweat shop workers to produce the rest of their goods?

The best place for us to start is to question what we're being told. Sadly, it really is down to us as consumers to raise issues and make enquiries about what and who we invest our money in. The good news is that it usually takes just one complaint to the Advertising Standards Agency (asa.org.uk) for them to investigate the little green lies of a deceptive corporation.

Perhaps even more terrifying than the hard truth about some of our most trusted brands using greenwashing tactics, is the reality that many of us as consumers are perpetrators of a similar crime. Just as it's seen as profitable by manufacturers to scream green, a growing culture of eco-consciousness has resulted in customers using perceptions of ourselves as environmental crusaders as a form of currency to buy respect from our peers with.

According to a study from research specialists Decision Technology (dectech.co.uk), us customers are most guilty of exaggerating our recycling behaviour, with nine in 10 (87 per cent) people claiming to have recycled in the last week, while only just over half (52 per cent) of people actually have.

Being perceived as a pillar of the conscious community is evidently more important to many businesses and consumers than truly tackling environmental destruction. When holding organisations accountable for their unsustainable actions, we must ensure we hold up a mirror to ourselves, too.

It's extremely telling to see that one of the most celebrated stage-dwellers at this year's Glastonbury Festival was Sir David Attenborough, a man whose great success is emblematic of the desire of the consumer to protect our planet. We are clearly on the right tracks, but if we can maintain our public eco-consciousness behind closed doors, things will only improve further. If you can't do it for yourself, do it for David. ■

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