

Public Growing Savvy to Insincere Green Campaigns



Cal Shirley

Green is a popular buzzword these days. We hear it used everywhere from the labels for everyday household products to ads for some of the world's industrial giants. But how do you sift through the "green sheen" and know when claims are genuine? And, is your own business in danger of getting caught in the trap of claiming to be greener than it is?

There's no denying that touting your company's greenness can help boost sales and differentiate your products and services, but you want to make sure the boasts you're making can be backed up by facts. Here are some ways to check whether your business is truly green.

You know you're "green washing" if:

You use less because it's cheaper but call it

green. Ever stay in a hotel that leaves paper plaques on the sink to remind you to save water by keeping your used towels an extra day? That's the classic definition of green washing. It's a cost-cutting practice disguised as environmental responsibility. That's not to say cutting back to save money is bad. All businesses are conscious of their bottom line, particularly now, but that doesn't necessarily make them green.

Being truly green means developing business practices that minimize resource use with the intention of supporting a more sustainable future, whether it's the energy, water or paper you use or paying attention to your carbon emissions. Start with that intention and then take advantage of saving mechanisms that cut back on the costs of implementing your green measures. Be green first with an added benefit for your bottom line, not the other way around.

You throw your paper away in a garbage can made from recycled materials.

It's great that you have a cool looking pen caddy made from old tires on your

desk, but being green runs much deeper than using environmentally friendly, recycled or natural decor. Identifying business practices that consume resources and produce waste and then cutting back on those is the best way to make sure you're responsible in your use. Taking a closer look at your energy and resource use can pinpoint places to save. Local utilities want you to use less too and can help with energy-efficiency measures and other resource-saving tools.

You claim certifications you don't have. This may seem like an obvious no-no, but haven't you heard someone call their business a "Fortune 500" company without having made the list? Green certifications already suffer the same misuse, and my guess is that as "green" becomes more imbedded in business parlance, that misuse will only get more rampant.

The only place "green" comes up is in your marketing department. Using nature images on millions of direct mail pieces might sell widgets, but is that really doing anything to protect the environment? Did anyone ever mention the company's environmental agenda before your current ad campaign? That's a dead giveaway that the

green message is only designed to promote sales and not an indicator of the company's deeper commitment to protecting the environment. It's great that the company wants to be seen that way, but it makes you wonder how long it will last and how deep it will run.

Being green is not easy, but starting with that intention will lead to better practices. It will take a company-wide commitment to addressing the environmental impact of practices throughout the organization, including political activities, responses to crises, energy and resource use, choice of fleet vehicles, and activities in facilities, and then, just as importantly, taking steps in support of that company mandate from the CEO all the way down the chain of command. There will always be critics, but don't let that hold you back from making steps toward improvement. It will take time to adjust, but if your commitment is in the right place, you'll get there eventually. Oh, OK, I'll quote Kermit: "It's not easy being green,"...but now from me, Cal, "It IS possible!"

Cal Shirley is vice president, Energy Efficiency Services for Puget Sound Energy.

