

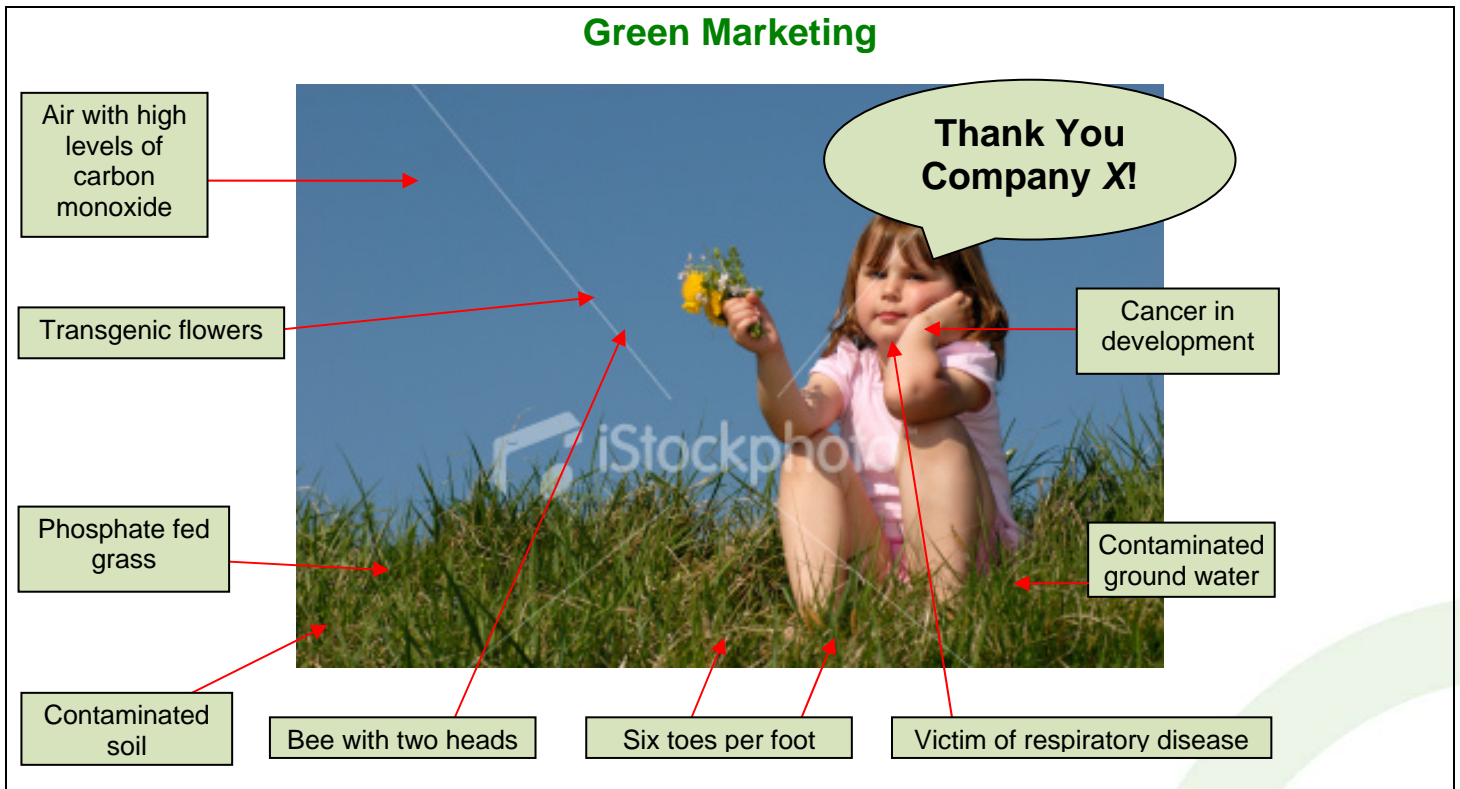
**Green Marketing or simply the art of appearing holier than thou?**

*Disclaimer: Writing this article caused minimal damage to the environment.*

Green marketing is very trendy these days. In ads or on Websites, we can't even count the quantity of businesses that show scenes of little children running through greener than green fields saying: Thank you! We can't count the number of businesses that suddenly discover that they have a newfound respect and love for the environment. We can't count the quantity of business that all of the sudden go green, from one day to the next, poof, as if by magic!

Declaring oneself as green is easy... But does a company become green simply because they declare it? Does a company become green because they no longer use plastic bags or because they wash their facilities with bio-degradable soap? Is it that easy to become green? Of course not! However, it is easy to mislead clients and take them for imbeciles.

If the only objective of business's green marketing initiatives is to make money by presenting a favourable image to the clientele, using some sort of ecological pretext without any real overall global strategy, then what they're doing is not really called green marketing, it's called greenwashing. Definition: *The dissemination of misleading information by an organization to conceal its abuse of the environment in order to present a positive public image.*



Green marketing is not as easy at it looks.

When a company decides to label itself as green, it has to expect that a giant spotlight will be pointed at it. Every action labelled as green will be scrutinized by environmental groups in order to find a flaw. A company that proclaims itself as green, most often proclaims itself as holier than thou. Companies that are completely green... well, in the real world, that doesn't exist.

The environmental marketing firm [TerraChoice](#), one of the North American leaders in their field, has once again in 2009 performed a large research project to verify the green claims of 2219 products found on the shelves of large surface area stores in Canada, the US, England, and Australia. According to their research, 98% of products labelling themselves as green are guilty of at least one act of greenwashing.

TerraChoice defined the six major sins of greenwashing as follows:

- **Sin of the Hidden Trade-Off:**
  - I.e.: "Energy-efficient" electronics that contain hazardous materials.
- **Sin of No Proof:**
  - I.e.: Shampoos claiming to be "certified organic," but with no verifiable certification.
- **Sin of Vagueness:**
  - I.e.: Products claiming to be 100% natural when many naturally occurring substances are hazardous, like arsenic and formaldehyde.
- **Sin of Irrelevance:**
  - I.e.: Products claiming to be CFC-free, even though CFCs were banned 20 years ago.
- **Sin of Fibbing:**
  - I.e.: Products falsely claiming to be certified by an internationally recognized environmental standard like EcoLogo, Energy Star or Green Seal.
- **Sin of Lesser of Two Evils:**
  - I.e.: Organic cigarettes or "environmentally friendly" pesticides.

One thing is logically clear and obvious: any type of production implies pollution. It's really nice to have a big green recycling bin filled to capacity, but doesn't that actually imply that we're consuming too much and therefore polluting? The current global recession is doing more for the environment than all the green efforts of all the companies around the world combined!

Green marketing is about educating and implicating the client.

Bearing in mind that most companies that claim to do green marketing are only greenwashing their clients; that begs the question: what really is green marketing?

Green marketing is above all about educating and implicating clients. Green marketing is not one sided, it doesn't only happen on the business's side, the client is also responsible for the wellbeing of the environment. However, clients are not necessarily experts on environmental issues therefore the purpose of green marketing should be to achieve an increase in the number of clients who are ready and who want to become greener. The best way to do that is through education. The more clients know about the subject, the more willing they are to modify their purchasing practices in favour of greener products.

Clients have to be involved and included in green efforts. They have to be made responsible and accountable. They are at the heart of campaigns. We have to give them the chance to make a positive contribution to the environment, to feel pride in the choices they make. Implicated clients become the best ambassadors that a business can have. They will carry a company's message with them and they will talk about it to their friends, family, and peers, thusly spreading it with pride wherever they go.



## Reconciling the irreconcilable?

Merging the science of marketing and the philosophy of green is not easy. The fundamental purposes of each are incompatible on many levels: ideology, culture, profitability. Marketing implies selling more, it implies consuming more; it always aims for the concept of MORE. Green philosophy implies reducing pollution, reducing consumption; in short it always aims for the concept of LESS. Since green marketing seeks to implicate the client to achieve success, we quickly realise that there are many different possible levels to this practice.

The green aspect of a company cannot be marketed just like any other selling point. People are sensitive to this subject, it automatically generates suspicion, and there are tonnes of pressure groups out there that follow your every move, especially if you officially label yourself as green. We need to keep in mind that there is always a possibility to be greener than what you already are, despite your best efforts. That's what the pressure groups notice. Not what you've accomplished, but what's left for you to accomplish. That's why green marketing shouldn't count on blah-blah or artifice, it has to be discreet, but we'll get to that later.

Additionally, oftentimes the green efforts made by a company can become cancelled out by that companies own growth. For example let's take a company that managed to reduce its ecological footprint by 10%. If this company increases its sales by 3% each year, in a little over three years all their green efforts would be cancelled out by the increase in their overall production. On your own personal side, if you decide to get rid of your old car and buy a new hybrid, you could be polluting more than if you would have kept driving your old car. We often forget that producing a product also produces a considerable amount of pollution. The question then becomes: what pollutes more? Manufacturing a new hybrid car for you to buy or you using your old car until it gives out? If your recycling box is always filled to the brim, that's not necessarily a sign that you're environmentally responsible, it could be sign that you consume too much and therefore you pollute too much!

## **The different levels of green marketing**

*It will always be less damaging for a company not to present themselves as green than to do it wrong and be exposed to criticism.*

John Grant, author of the book *The Green Marketing Manifesto*<sup>1</sup>, defined three levels of green: Green, Greener, Greenest, wherein the consumer and the company each occupy a different role and have different responsibilities.

### Green

Here we put in place new standards of responsibility for products, policies, and procedures. The objectives are purely commercial. It's marketing as usual. We look to build our image, to sell our image, to sell the green side of things. We're trying to prove to the consumer that the new standards that we've put in place are really real. Here, the involvement of the consumer is passive. They vote with their wallets by choosing one product over another.

What we must keep in mind about green marketing is that it has to remain factual. We have to let the people to decide for themselves if a company or a product is good for the environment. This type of marketing should not be boring, even though it has to be rigorously true. There should be no exaggeration, nor deformity of reality. Those would be discovered rapidly, and the consequences would become quickly apparent.

By acting on this level, we have to expect that any innovation we put in place will also be put in place by all our competitors, this year or in the years that follow. Therefore, this is only the first step.



### Greener

Here we look to share some of the responsibility with the clients. Not only do we make our products better, we endeavour to teach clients to use them in a better way, to encourage a more responsible use, and to change consumer habits. This implies much more education and implication than simply 'selling' a company's green side. For example, this can take the form of a detergent company suggesting that clothes be washed in cold water instead of hot. We go one level higher, not only did we make a better product; we've also asked the consumer to use it better.

### Greenest

Here we completely review a company's business model. It's at this level that a business can make the most positive change to the environment because the business changes the nature of their product. Here we seek to support and encourage innovations, to develop new habits, new products, and new business models. The purpose is no longer to encourage more consumption but to reduce it; maximising product usage by offering better products of higher quality.

The purpose is not only to produce long lasting and durable products, but to encourage a type of sharing between users. The time when it was normal for a product to break after a few years of usage, when it was simply less expensive to buy a new one than to repair the old one is over. At this stage we have to review the very definition of possession and propriety.

For example, a typical gas-powered lawnmower is only used for an hour per week, and only in the summer. All your neighbours currently own a lawnmower that is only used at 0.3% capacity! That's not saying a lot. Let's say that people use their lawnmowers only over the week-end and only between 8AM and 8PM, we quickly come to the realisation that a single lawnmower can do the work of twenty-four! So why don't we replace those twenty-four lawnmowers with a single one that we share? It's due to our link to possessions and propriety, and that should be reviewed. Consumers would come out as winners because on the long run it would cost them less to pay per use than to own the product.

Considering the pollution associated with the construction of a single lawnmower, we can clearly see that by sharing one gas-powered lawnmower in the neighbourhood, the effects on the environment would be much less severe than if each person in the neighbourhood owned a solar-powered lawnmower.

Seems impossible? Many companies are already working with this type of business model. Libraries have been doing it for ages! Car sharing, like Montreal's *Communauto*, and communal bicycles, like Montreal's *Bixi*, are already seeing considerable success. Xerox is working more durable photocopiers. Instead of selling them to businesses, Xerox rent's them out and assures repair services in case of malfunction or damage. This way Xerox can recycle components into new machines.

Is this type of business model possible for your company? Of course, but it implies a reduction in production and sales, and it's always difficult to take a business direction axed on reduction. However, a new player, or an existing competitor that arrives on the market with this business model will find himself with a considerable potential for growth. Do you want to maintain your position in your industry? This is the time to think about it, now, before it's too late.

### In conclusion

Green Marketing is a serious affair. Sadly, many companies decide to bet everything on appearances and artifice, a short-term tactic that lacks much honesty. They put their reputations on the line by showcasing themselves as a model of virtue. However, just like with Internet dating sites, if you claim you are good-looking, if you claim you are intelligent, if



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you claim that you have class, if you claim you are the perfect catch, and if you're lying, it is only a matter of time before the truth is discovered.

Going truly green is not easy and it implies a lot of work on many levels. It requires a re-thinking of almost everything your business does and the way it does it. On the long run, however, it will become crystal clear that an honest and thoughtful approach is best... for your business, for the environment, and for your reputation!