



Issue 5 | Sep 2009

ONBRAND

ideas, thoughts & commentary

#01

This month we ask if it's time communication consultancies brushed up their green credentials because there's a lot of window dressing going on and it isn't fooling everybody!

Conservation and sustainability are no longer just semantics but serious branding issues.

Communication consultants need to know exactly what they are talking about and be able to give credible advice because the green world is watching!

August is a brand focused communications consultancy offering high level strategic and creative brand building and maintenance advice to build and sustain effective brands, even 'green ones', with style and substance.

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The Green World is Watching. Are Communication Agencies Ready?

#02

Is it time communication consultancies brushed up their green credentials? Seeing through 'greenwashing' briefs and having the insights to make genuine claims and build brands that are authentic and the real 'green' thing may prove to be quite a minefield.

How many of us have seen friendly 'save the environment' notices in hotel bathrooms and wondered if using a towel more than once will help save the planet or if it's maybe just a cute piece of cost-cutting on the hotel laundry bill?

Brands used to address needs, wants, aspirations and the instant gratification of consumers.

But in the brave new sensitive environmentally conscious world, brands not only have to be politically correct, but they have an additional role to play in placating the consciences of customers.

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#03

Brands with a wholesome, politically correct and environmentally aware personality will be tomorrow's winners. There's a lot of window dressing now; but it isn't fooling everybody!

Children's products, cosmetics and cleaning products enjoy high levels of greenwashing, manipulating consumer safety concerns by capitalizing supposed health and safety benefits of 'green' living.

So, how is the communications industry coping with 'green' briefs and skeptical consumers?

Do advertising and branding practitioners know how to build brands and change perceptions that are in sync with changing attitudes?

Communication agencies are often asked to reveal their ISO Standards, offer contactable references, showcase creative work, divulge ownership structures and lodge performance bonds; all in the 'bare all' pitch process.

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#04

But, can you imagine how much more perplexing it will be when agencies are asked to discuss their own 'green credentials'. If carbon footprints, understanding the subtleties of conservation, sustainability and ecologically sound principles become part of agency selection criteria, will agencies be cutting air travel, meat eating and dumping their 4 x 4s?

Environmental 'greenwashing' is usually associated with the 'spin' some companies use to position products as environmentally friendly - when the real game is cost cutting!

Going green really means using less resources and making changes that actually benefit the environment

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#05

When more money and time is spent advertising how green you are than spending on environmentally sound practices – that's greenwashing. This can often be as simple as changing the name or label and not much else.

That's the cynical side of the coin. But right here in the UAE environmentally friendly projects are setting new standards, attracting positive worldwide attention and putting the UAE very positively on the world's environmental map.

August Brand Strategy & Corporate Design is privileged to be in touch with nature via its ongoing relationship with a focused, committed and passionate client who places sustainability and conservation at the forefront of everything it does.

No greenwashing is done here at august!

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#06

Over 30 % percent of food and beverage products launched last year made a 'natural' claim.

Consumers are becoming more aware of the 'puffery' in general claims using essentially meaningless and vague words without any standard definitions. Consumers are reading and rejecting claims like 'Natural,' 'Hypoallergenic,' 'Nontoxic,' 'Fragrance-free,' 'Unscented,' 'Hormone-free,' 'Antibiotic-free,' 'Eco-friendly,' 'eco-safe' and the all time favourite-Green!

Specific claims resonate better, are believable and are often substantiated by third parties. Formaldehyde-free, No additives, No animal byproducts, No parabens, Phosphate-free are absolute claims that are generally indisputable – that's why they are not even in 'inverted commas!'

The green world is watching!

The environment is no longer just about semantics. It's a serious branding issue and communication consultants need to know exactly what they are talking about before they will be able to give credible advice.

With so many similar and borderline misleading environmental claims being made every day, green credentials are often easily rustled up by using an environmentally friendly color palette, well chosen words and efficient philanthropy to secure an environmentally friendly sponsorship deal.

Misleading environmental claims have so far fallen outside of what generally constitutes misleading advertising. But environmental claims of major brands are falling foul of advertising standards authorities in major markets, and advertising agencies are often the fall guys, guilty of dressing things up to meet 'go green' briefs.

Agencies need to brush up their own understanding of environmental issues, at the very least to see through 'greenwashing' briefs, avoid being seen to be part of the problem and behave like consultants should; by giving honest, informed and brave advice.

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#07

Just make them feel good!

Carbon Emission Trading. How realistic is this when carbon is priced too low and big emitters get 'free credits'. But it makes people feel good! So by some measure it's working.

And the 'Eco Friendly' Credit Card that rewards customers with carbon offsets to 'reduce your carbon footprint' by purchasing goods (even polluting ones) with the card. A fraction of the purchase price goes into purchasing carbon offsets - the rest of the interchange fee still goes to the bank. What a surprise!

Vague and ambiguous labeling entices consumers to believe they are purchasing a product with far greater eco-friendly benefits than is often the case. Yet just as greenwashing misleads, packaging is seldom substantiated sufficiently to prove itself.

Environmental awareness is an emotional trigger; just as important as other wants (as opposed to needs). Branding consultancies are being asked to design for the new green world, often without a depth of knowledge to recognize the legal pitfalls or the thin ice they are on – caused of course by the global warming traceable to environmentally unfriendly products!

Clean Coal! Slick words to reposition an old product, but according to Fred Pearce's Greenwash column in The Guardian, 'clean coal' is the 'ultimate climate change oxymoron' – 'pure and utter greenwash' he says.

This Communication Agency hopes greenwashing doesn't become yet another backhanded compliment awarded to our industry.

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