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GREEN WASHING: DECEPTIVE BUSINESS CLAIMS TO BILK THE BUYER

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ABSTRACT

The increasing environmental awareness of customers is making green marketing a mainstream. Irrespective of practicing green marketing, many companies are also helping the eco-system, by adopting environment friendly and protection activities. This environmental protection has gained great concern; not only in India but in other countries as well. But beyond business ethics few/many companies are engaged in some deceptive activities to mislead the customers through advertisements, labelling, providing misleading information or through fake offers on the products. This is a major problem that customers face in the present decade. This study has tried to find out, reasons why firms get engaged in green washing activities and how green washing can be avoided. A large number of reports claim that not only the small players but biggest market players in India and abroad are engaged in some sort of green washing activities. The study results may be beneficial for the society in knowing the aforesaid concealed aspect.

KEYWORDS

green washing, green marketing, deceptive, concealed, bilk.

INTRODUCTION

Green marketing has been an important academic research topic since last few decades. Earlier a majority of multinational companies were not aware of this new concept, "Green Marketing" and engaged in manufacturing only traditional products. Even people have become more conscious about their own health, besides taking care for environmental protection. Not even the environment protection, but the customer also wants value returned products on his/her purchase. So, the companies are now thinking that the best way to increase the sales and survive in the market is adopting environmentally friendly and fair business claims. But who knows the reality, whether the products delivered in the name of green, are green products in reality or the companies are engaged in green washing?

Although most of companies claim that their products are green, but then it's hard to believe the promises. In an article published by CBC News on 14 September 2012, there were found 10 household products marked for committing green washing. In an another online/internet report by Business Pundit, 25 top products from America have been found green washed which include air travel, toys, cars, home cleaners and detergents, mattresses, personal care, beauty care, home appliances, hotels, dairy, water bottles, soft drinks, snacks etc. The Problem has been seriously traced in India also.

This research paper aims to find out "whether it's true that companies are following green marketing, on the basis of promises made or indulged in green washing".

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

GREEN WASHING

The term Green washing came into existence in 1990. According to Greenpeace, Greenwashing is "the act of misleading consumers regarding environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service".

The consumers are now demanding a sustainable product, that's why companies claim that all their products are environmental friendly and sustainable. But in reality companies do not follow such practices and also don't have any facts to express their claims to be right. This is called green washing (Burg, 2013).

According to the consumer protection act Unfair Trade Practices are employed to promote the sale, usage by customers and supply of the goods by adopting the deceptive business claims by:

1. Making false oral or written business claims.
2. Publishing any false advertisement in the newspaper to sell goods at bargain prices, but it is not intended to do so in the reality.
3. Promising the customers to deliver the gifts, prizes just to increase the sale. But in reality it doesn't happen.

TABLE I: SECTOR WISE KIND OF UNFAIR TRADE PRACTICES FOLLOWED

Kind of UTPs	Sectors				
	Pharmaceutical	Food Processing	Insurance	Securities	Education
Misleading Advertisements	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Labeling/ Misbranding	Yes	Yes	-----	-----	-----
Adulteration	Yes	Yes	-----	-----	-----
Business to Business	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-----
Misrepresentation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
False/ Unfair/ Misleading information	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hoardings	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	-----
Starting an offer without the intention to comply	-----	-----	Yes	Yes	-----
Tied Sales	-----	-----	-----	-----	Yes

Source: Report on Unfair Trade Practices (UTP) and Institutional Challenges in India

Unfair Trade Practices (UTP) and Institutional Challenges in India have found that Pharmaceutical and food processing sectors are completely engaged in the green washing practices followed by insurance and securities sector, which must be checked. Inter-ministerial monitoring committee is constituted in India to overcome and check this rising issue. But a large number of websites are there; whose regular monitoring is a tough task. So the consumer help is must required by this committee to control greenwashing.

Laufer W.S. (2003) said that in last few years the concern about the deception practices has risen. The competition act 2002 says that these deceptive practices of the companies should be treated under the consumer protection act 1986. Terrachoice Environmental Marketing Inc. (2007, 2008, 2009, and 2010) conducted a survey that identified six sins of green washing which increased to seven by 2010.

According to Terrachoice Environmental Marketing report, (2010), The seven sins of greenwashing are as follows:

1. **SIN OF THE HIDDEN TRADE-OFF:** This sin is committed when a company claims its product is green, on the basis of few unreasonable attributes, without focusing on environmental aspect.

2. **SIN OF NO PROOF:** This sin is committed by giving an environmental claim about a product, but without any evidence to support the claim or no third party certification.
3. **SIN OF VAGUENESS:** This sin is committed if any company poorly defines its product features, which may further lead to consumer misunderstanding.
4. **SIN OF IRRELEVANCE:** This sin is committed by making an environmental claim, which may be true, but is unhelpful for the customer while purchasing environmental friendly product.
5. **SIN OF LESSER OF TWO EVILS:** This sin is committed by making claims which may be true in that particular product category, but may distract the consumers from long run environmental impacts of the product as a whole.
6. **SIN OF FIBBING:** this sin is committed by making environmental claims those are truly false.
7. **SIN OF WORSHIPPING FALSE LABELS:** This sin is committed when a company gives the impression of third party endorsement through images, or words, but in reality no such things exists.

Every year the number of firms practicing green washing is increasing. Earlier all these companies were not indulged in such negative activities but with time they became engaged in such negative practices. The above studies did not support the valid reasons for why firms are engaged in green washing and how to overcome it.

NEED/IMPORTANCE OF STUDY

Since, in the race of making profits and increasing sales, companies sometimes deliver products those do not match with the claims made. People are always misinterpreted in the name of best quality, features, price and other benefits. This study may help to raise the awareness of people about various greenwashing activities a firm get engage in. This may help the people, to choose the best product while purchasing, that is free from greenwashing. People will also be benefitted by knowing, why firms adopt green washing and how this problem can be overcome.

OBJECTIVES

- To know the reality behind greenwashing and rise the measures for avoidance at consumer and marketer level both.
- Finding out various firms those are operating in India for engaged in greenwashing activities.

FINDINGS

REASONS: FIRMS PRACTICING GREEN WASHING (EXAMPLES FROM INDIAN INDUSTRY)

The firms engage in green washing just to increase the sales on the name of green or environmental friendly products, or selling the products by highlighting more value than in reality. This is done because the people always want value oriented products that are beneficial to their own health and for the environment, but most of the times they fail to get it.

FEW CASES

- Pepsi Co has claimed to achieve "positive water balance" in India that it is Giving Back MORE WATER than it takes. In 2010 the India Resource Center approached to Pepsico to know about on what basis Pepsico is claiming "positive water balance." It was found that all the claims given by Pepsico were false and were just to bilk the customers.
- Duracell batteries claim for long life. The Duracell Inc got sued in US because people complained these batteries were more expensive than the others and didn't provide longer life than the regular alkaline batteries.

FIG. 1



Source: <http://soldin60secs.wordpress.com/2012/05/25/top-10-famous-deceptive-ads/>

- Nestle claims that new Nestle bottles contain less plastic as compared to previous bottles and other competitors. But in reality the plastic usage causes environmental problems. This claim is called hiding trade off. Moreover the Haryana Government has taken strict actions against Nestle for using misleading and inappropriate visuals in their advertisement. Nestle is found engaged in deceptive labelling and a case has been filed against Nestle.
- The coca-cola Company was charged for grabbing the land of the farmers and throwing away harmful wastes into the surrounding community. For this San Francisco-based India Resource Centre, charged Coca-Cola for releasing the untreated waste water into the nearby agricultural fields and a canal of the Ganges River in Uttar Pradesh.
- In 2009 McDonald changed its logo colour from yellow and red to yellow and green, claiming for preserving natural resources.
- National Survey on milk adulteration 2011 found that liquid milk is the most contaminated product Indian people are consuming and 70 percent of the samples taken by food safety authority did not confirm to the standards. The milk samples found detergents, urea; starch etc. to increase the thickness of milk.
- According to Times of India (September 2, 2011) JK Singh, deputy director of the Patna state's lone food and drug laboratory said that More than 25 percent of the total 300 food samples were found adulterated.
- Angre, K. and Bhatt, A.(November 30, 2012) found that Food Safety Standards Authority of India, have sent notices to 38 companies for misleading advertisements. The famous companies like Complan have been sent the notice for its claim that it helps the children to grow twice as compared to other competitors. Boost and Horlics have also been sent the notices for their claim that these energy drinks develop the child stamina and make them smarter.
- In a report of News channel IBN, Ranbaxy has been fined \$ 50 million for selling adulterated drugs manufactured in India and sold in United States during 2005-2006.

Few or most other companies are also engaged in green washing by doing at least one of the green washing sins. Even Orange Juice, Honey, flour, ice-cream, edible-oils are also adulterated, Pujani, S. (March 30, 2014).

RECOMMENDATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS**AVOIDING GREEN WASHING**

Green washing can be avoided if both the companies as well as customers think of their respective responsibilities.

RESPONSIBILITIES AT THE COMPANY END

1. Being transparent in what a company preaches and practices.
2. Being specific to the thoughts, vision, and mission of the company.
3. Always be ready for questions of the public.
4. Using eco-labels with accurate information about eco-friendly nature of the products.
5. Using easily accessible sources of communication so that maximum of people get updated about the company.

RESPONSIBILITIES AT THE CUSTOMER END:

1. Asking relevant questions to the company representatives.
2. Using own common sense while purchasing and comparing products.
3. Avoid products that make irrelevant claims though packaging, labelling or advertising.
4. Never buy, seeing the attractive and pretty labels.
5. Check with the certifier to verify the product is truly certified for being green/ eco-friendly/ what has been said about the product.
6. Learn the name of harmful ingredients and try to avoid products made with these.
7. Don't be misguided by the colours and eco-friendly pictures of the packaging.
8. Never buy just because of celebrity endorsement, rather search for the product features.

HOW TO MAKE SURE THAT A COMPANY IS NOT DOING GREEN WASHING

The customers must check the following aspects:

1. Customers must check the packaging of the products a company offers. The claims on the packaging must be clear and specific. The products should possess the environmental certifications.
2. The customers should check that the travelling source of the company is green and offering carbon neutral shipping for the transportation of the goods.
3. The customers must verify that vendors of the company are meeting the required environmental standards.
4. The Green washing Index can be much helpful for customers in this regard.

CONCLUSION

The present study revealed that green washing is a matter of concern for both marketers as well as consumers. A large number of companies are adopting green washing to make their appearance as a green company. All this is beyond the social ethics and is a major problem to be taken care off. The customer is the king of the market; always gets himself/herself updated about the products through various sources of information. It will adversely affect the sales of these companies in the near future, if these players remained engaged in such unethical practices. So the companies should avoid green washing practices for sustainable growth.

Moreover, the customers should actively take interest in avoiding the products of the companies engaged in green washing. Government should also start special programs to make people aware of this issue and how to avoid it. The knowledge of the Greenwashing Index to the customers can help a lot. In short the collaborative efforts of both marketers and the customer are needed to create an environmental friendly and healthy atmosphere by distributing quality oriented products.

SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Since, a large number of examples regarding greenwashing are there prevailing in India, and most of Indian consumers don't have knowledge about it. A future study can be conducted to provide remedy to Indian customers about misleading information delivered by different firms. The Multi National Companies operating in different countries adopt different strategies of greenwashing according to market condition of that country. For these companies only countries are on a change, not the basic strategies being practiced inside the firm, either for production, advertising or greenwashing. It might be a possibility, what a company practices in one country must be transferred to another one and even the greenwashing practices also. But, customers of one country perhaps remain in uncertainty that the green washing practices adopted in other countries by same Company will not be prevailing in their own country. The hidden aspect of this reality cannot be found, until analyzed very minutely. The future study on such a concealed aspect can cater a lot to societal benefits.

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