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“Don’t throw anything away”: Greenwashing in public relations

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Abstract

As environmentalism becomes increasingly popular, the importance of environmental language, images and ideas becomes more critical. This paper discusses the significance of environmental communication and its potential role as a “green” cloak for environmentally destructive practices and companies.

Although there are many examples of the corporate use of “greenwash”, this paper illustrates the concept using one of Shell Oil’s controversial advertisements from 2007. Greenwash is a communications strategy which uses environmental images and language to make corporate activity appear eco-friendly, whether or not it is environmentally destructive. Through content analysis, visual decoding, and with reference to findings by regulators, the argument offered here demonstrates the power, and the complex rationale, behind greenwash activity. Contextualising the critical dissection of the advertisement in question within academic debates over the role and prevalence of greenwash, the paper illustrates how this approach has become an important communication tool, often associated with public relations spin. A multitude of equivalent advertisements, and the growing discussion about environmental responsibility and corporate greenwash, indicate the need for significant research in this field.

For environmentalists, greenwash evolved from the term “ecopornography”, which originated in the mid-1960s (Turner, 1970). This term, coined by Madison Avenue advertising executive Jerry Mander, spoke out against the vulgar display of environmental attributes in corporate advertising—a response to the awakening of environmental consciousness in the aftermath of the hippy movement (Mander, 1970, p. 47). The 1980s saw a host of environmental disasters, such as the famed Chernobyl meltdown (1986) and the Exxon Valdez (1989) spill. During this decade, the term “greenwash” entered discourse. In 1986, New York environmentalist Jay Westerveld coined “greenwash” in a critical essay about the hotel industry’s abuse of the green movement’s popularity (Hayward, 2009). Greenwash and green-credentialed advertisements gained momentum from the 1970s and onwards until, around the time of the 20th Earth Day (1990), “one-fourth of all household products that came on the

market . . . advertised themselves as ‘recyclable’, ‘biodegradable’, ‘ozone friendly’, or ‘compostable’” (Thien, 1993, p. 18).

What is greenwash?

Definitions of greenwash tend to vary and be somewhat vague, owing to its relatively new incorporation into mainstream discourse, which has produced a variety of definitions (Lyon & Maxwell, 2006, pp. 4-5). The *Greenpeace book of greenwash* (Bruno, 1992), hailed as one of the cornerstone publications on greenwash identification, offers no clear definition of the term. Instead, the book goes on to explain the history and implications of greenwash, with in-depth case studies. It explains greenwash strategies, such as so-called “volunteer environmentalism”, “campaigning” and the formation of environmental groups, which can be constructed as tokenistic or “hollow” (Bruno, 1992). William Laufer’s *Social accountability and corporate greenwashing* also presents a series of tactics and strategies used in greenwash, such as “fronting”, “confusion” and “posturing” (2003, p. 257). But a clear, academic definition is lacking. In these circumstances, *The Oxford English dictionary* offers a useful definition for greenwash: “disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image” (2009).

Shell Oil

Royal Dutch Shell, also known as Shell Oil or simply Shell, has spent significant advertising and public relations resources on green campaigns, earning it a “lifetime achievement award” in CorpWatch’s satirical Greenwash Academy Awards (2002). There are many anti-greenwash organisations, CorpWatch being one, that attack a number of Shell’s “green” advertisements as being fake and misleading environmental propaganda. Shell’s controversial environmental advertising spans from the current Canadian Oil Sands campaign back to 1957, when Shell started drilling in Nigeria (Shell Oil, 2009b). Such conflicts present, in the words of Murdock et al. (2003, p. 159), “the public sphere as a gladiatorial or sporting arena in which competing power-holders battle for advantage and public support”. As this paper suggests, however, Shell’s environmental conflicts may also involve strategic feints as part of the entertainment.

According to Shell’s website, the company operates in more than 100 countries and achieved the number one ranking in the Fortune 500 in 2009 (Shell Oil, 2009a). The first page of Shell’s 2008 *Sustainability report* is filled with green statements by former CEO Jeroen van der Veer. Activities mentioned include “increasing stakes in biofuels” and being “involved in a number of demonstrating projects for CO₂ technology”, along with promoting a “sustainable development mindset”. These are just a few of the “green” phrases that dot the report.

Shell’s *Business principles*, first published in 1978, place sustainable development in a very visible position, immediately after the introduction:

As part of the Business Principles, we commit to contribute to sustainable development. This requires balancing short and long term interests, integrating economic, environmental and social considerations into business decision-making. (2009c, p. 3)

A close look at this kind of language shows that it is actually non-committal, and critics argue that it consists of empty promises and excessive reliance on non-specific, greenwash language—“sustainable development”, “balancing”, “environmental considerations”—arguably to project a positive image. Indeed, by 2006 commentators

could argue that, in the mid-1990s, “Shell’s environmental credentials were unrecognized by the public who instead saw Shell as an exemplar of environmentally untrustworthy ‘Big Oil’” (Bakir, 2006, p. 82).

This paper analyses one of Shell’s recent advertisements from 2007, which implies that the corporation recycles its waste in an eco-friendly manner. Shell released the advertisement around the time of its yearly financial and sustainability reports.

The research question which informed the analysis of the advertisement is:

Why did Shell produce this seemingly obvious greenwash advertisement and what were the tactics that were both literally and figuratively apparent?

The question interrogates why greenwash takes place and what function it plays in a corporation’s public relations, rather than any controversy it may spark. It is important to recall that Shell’s core business is the location, extraction, refining and exploitation of fossil fuels—all processes that have environmental impacts in the short-term as well as the long-term, and in the local arena as well as the global one. Thus, Shell’s use of greenwash must offer a benefit to its bottom line, which is not saving the environment.

Shell, public relations and greenwash

Though greenwash is apparent in advertising and marketing, as well as in public relations, it is often associated with the idea of public relation “spin”. The framework that many forms of anti-greenwash literature take is that greenwash is a public relations tool that “spins” a comment to make it seem environmental (Bruno, 1992; Alves, 2009, pp. 1-2). Anti-greenwash organisations, such as CorpWatch and Earthfirst, act as online information hubs for anti-greenwash literature. Both CorpWatch’s name and the fact that a great majority of the literature on its website deals with greenwash suggest that greenwash is clearly linked to a corporation’s public relations.

Some of Shell’s green claims hint at a strategy that seems to invite criticism. Bruno (2002) notes disbelief at Shell’s use of environmental language and how it contradicts itself when he critiques Shell’s 1998 *Profits and principles*, which is now updated to reduce inconsistencies. In his analysis, Bruno presents readers with Shell’s “green” image. The word “sustainable” is everywhere, as Bruno comments:

Says Shell, “It’s all part of our commitment to sustainable development.” Their ad writer should read an essay in Shell’s own glossy “Profits and Principles” booklet. Buried in the expensive and lovely pages of that publication is this nugget of truth . . . “a sustainable oil company is a contradiction in terms”. (Bruno, 2002, p. 11) [This book has since been updated, removing the phrase.]

Shell’s communication campaigns fall into the four-model framework first proposed by Grunig and Hunt in *Managing public relations* (1984). As Grunig and Hunt note (p. 42), an essential part of two-way communication is truth and being socially responsible. Igor Alves argues in “Green spin everywhere” that many of the elements of greenwash advertisements, such as using deceptive language and images and avoiding the real issues, are classic public relation spin tactics (2009, pp. 2-3). These tactics, in the case of the advertisement discussed below, present an organisation that claims to be environmentally conscious and holds its stakeholders’ wishes as a priority, often claiming to place this responsibility in the same sphere as its bottom line.

As will be shown, Shell presents its communication with key publics as being “two-way”, which follows the “asymmetric” and “symmetric” models (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 22).

These models include “mutual understanding”, “two-way communication”, and “scientific persuasion” as guiding communications between an organisation and its stakeholders. The idea of an understanding between an organisation and its publics in these models is that such understanding should either be based on scientific proof or open communication. “Two-way”, of course, means that the communication does not follow one channel but is influenced by and responsive to stakeholders. One could argue, then, that Shell takes the criticism from environmental activists as part of this “two-way” dialogue; yet, the criticism is the result of Shell making environmental claims that are misleading—effectively it is a “one-way” plus “one-way” communication since there is virtually no shared ground.

Some even suggest that Shell chose to employ environmental claims that advertising watchdogs brand deceptive or misleading as a purposeful tactic to cause controversy, thereby creating opportunities for Shell to re-brand itself with each new “trendy” environmental issue. Dale Hynd’s *Public relations-led advertising* claims that “PR-led advertising allows deviance to be attributed to an organization to gain free publicity”, which creates opportunities for re-branding (2001, pp. 6, 59). This “deviant” public relations resonates with a reactive public—in Shell’s case, environmentalists—and opens channels for publicity and re-branding. This is a strategy that is possible with Grunig and Hunts’ other two models: those of Press Agency/Publicity and Public Information (1984, p. 22). One element of these models’ “one-way” communication is the ability to manipulate language at all levels, stylistically (i.e. colour, shape, location) and grammatically.

The possibility that Shell uses greenwash knowing the reaction it may evoke, along with the nature of greenwash as a “spin” tool itself, warrants a need for greenwash theory in public relations academia and practice. The following analysis suggests that greenwash could be a strategy that switches from one- to two-way communication to keep an organisation’s brand flexible and largely free from responsibility.

Advertisement: Don’t throw anything away

Just before April 2007, when Shell released its sustainability report on its 2006 operations, an advertisement titled “Don’t throw anything away” appeared in the *Sunday Times Magazine*, the *Financial Times*, the *New Scientist*, and various independent magazines and newspapers throughout Europe (Friends of the Earth, 2007b). This advertisement quickly came under fire for its apparently blatant greenwash imagery and messaging (Kanter, 2007, Friends of the Earth, 2007a). The version used here appeared in the 19 May 2007 edition of the *New Scientist*. The two pieces of “Don’t throw anything away,” which cover the bottoms of pages 10 and 11 in the *New Scientist*, are shown on the following page:

DON'T THROW ANYTHING

IF ONLY WE HAD A MAGIC BIN THAT WE COULD THROW STUFF IN AND MAKE IT DISAPPEAR FOREVER. WHAT WE CAN DO IS FIND CREATIVE WAYS TO RECYCLE. GREENHOUSES USE OUR WASTE CO₂ TO GROW FLOWERS. AND OUR WASTE SULPHUR TO MAKE SUPER-STRONG CONCRETE.

REAL ENERGY SOLUTIONS FOR THE REAL WORLD.

10 | NewScientist | 19 May 2007 www.newscientist.com

AWAY THERE IS NO AWAY

www.newscientist.com 19 May 2007 | NewScientist | 11

Shortly after Shell published this advertisement, many environmental organisations and bloggers voiced their opinions about the apparent greenwash. Friends of the Earth released a statement and official complaint regarding the advertisement's use of greenwash imagery and language, such as flowers coming out of smokestacks, and the claims made that Shell recycles its waste but not saying how much waste is recycled (see Friends of the Earth, 2007b). The *New York Times* (Kanter, 2007) ran a story about the advertisement, as did other online news organisations such as MSN News and PR Watch. The various complaints included deceptive imagery, false claims and a lack of proof.

The UK-based Advertising Standards Association (ASA), which is the independent body responsible for regulating UK advertising, acted on the complaint filed by Friends of the Earth and ordered Shell to pull the advertisement. Unlike advertisement watchdogs in North America, the Advertising Standards Association has the power to force companies to pull their advertisements if they fail to meet the advertising codes (Advertising Standards Authority, 2009). The ASA's *The British code of advertising, sales promotion and direct marketing* (2009) explains the specific rules the UK advertising industry must adhere to, including sections on environmental claims, general rules, and an explanation on how the system works. The ASA's Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) addressed the Friends of the Earth complaint and decided to pull the advertisement, as its claims that Shell used its CO₂ waste to grow flowers and its waste sulphur to make concrete were misleading and lacked any statistical figures that demonstrated how much waste was used for flowers and concrete (see Friends of the Earth Australia, 2007).

Visual greenwash

Set against a light blue background, the dark blue smokestacks in "Don't throw anything away" offset their importance in the overall message, which is flowers and recycling. The first and most apparent image is the spewing forth of flowers. Using Terrachoice's *The seven sins of greenwashing* (2009), it is apparent that there are six "sins" being committed. Terrachoice's sins are:

- Sin of Hidden Trade-off (YES)
- Sin of No Proof (YES)
- Sin of Vagueness (YES)
- Sin of Worshipping False Labels (NO)
- Sin of Irrelevance (YES)
- Sin of Lesser of Two Evils (YES)
- Sin of Fibbing (YES)

According to this image, Shell produces no smoke. The literal message of this image is that Shell produces flowers instead of waste, which is a lie. The association with flowers is deceptive and irrelevant as it denies the obvious truth that only smoke comes out of smokestacks. Also, a hidden trade-off conveyed by flowers for smoke is apparent, as the lack of smoke suggests that Shell is portraying only a positive image of itself as a non-polluting company, which could be consistent with an "actively green" company (the sin of hidden trade-off). The Sin of Vagueness is that Shell does not make it apparent why

there are flowers. To know this, we have to read the small-print in the bottom left of the advertisement, which will be analysed below. The Sin of no Proof is apparent in the complete lack of statistics in the advertisement.

Conly's (2009, p. 1) theory is that greenwash adopts the language and images of environmentalists to undermine the company's opponents, as in the injunction "Don't throw anything away". One message behind this image is that Shell is actually making the atmosphere better, which reverses the idea that Shell's industrial air pollution makes the atmosphere worse. Interestingly, the style in which this advertisement appears is reminiscent of the "hippy" generation, with cartoon buildings and "psychedelic" flowers. Turner (1970, p. 263) refers to the adoption of the hippy generation's imagery as a strategy to exploit popular culture. By drawing on the "cool" and stylish images that we see in mainstream advertising, Shell is playing environmentalists' culture back to them, re-visioning its own impact on the natural environment.

Greenwash language

The language used in Shell's advertisement has been identified as an example of deception (Friends of the Earth, 2007b). The key message is immediately clear and is meant to draw attention to the top of the picture, where only flowers are visible. The phrase "Don't throw anything away, there is no away" is empty as it does not make a statement about Shell, but suggests (vaguely and indirectly) that it is good to recycle. This is an adoption of environmentalist language, used by Shell to position itself as a green company (see "posturing" in Laufer 2003, p. 257). Although it may seem obvious, the fact that only this key message is in large print may be a purposeful ploy to draw the viewer's attention to a simple message with no substance—that Shell wants people to throw nothing away. The implication is also that Shell doesn't throw anything away. How could Shell throw things away, after all, when its advertisement claims otherwise? That companies such as Shell believe that they can make statements such as this one is concerning because it suggests that consumers are easily deceived and manipulated by vague and unsupported environmental claims.

The statements in this advertisement that are designed to justify the imagery are contained in the small type at the bottom left corner:

If only we had a magic bin that we could throw stuff in and make it disappear forever. What we can do is find creative ways to recycle. Greenhouses use our waste CO₂ to grow flowers. And our waste sulphur to make super-strong concrete. Real energy solutions for the real world.

Alves (2009, p. 3) points out that a common strategy used by transnational corporations such as Shell is to hype their "green credentials in a poorly regulated market", This hype and, ultimately, deception is at the heart of this advertisement. The statement "Greenhouses use our waste CO₂ to grow flowers" is vague in that it does not say exactly how much of this waste is used, nor whether the production of flowers in any way offsets the production of pollution. As Friends of the Earth (2007a) notes, "Shell pipes carbon dioxide into greenhouses, saving 325,000 tonnes a year . . . This is 0.325% of Shell's total direct carbon dioxide emissions from its operations". Shell's "operations" in the above statement do not include other forms of CO₂ pollution, such as the burning of fossil fuels in planes and cars, to which Shell's business contributes. Thus, although Shell

does use an incredibly small amount of its waste to grow flowers, it does not use nearly enough to justify the idea of flowers coming out of smokestacks.

Using “waste sulphur to make super-strong concrete” is also misleading as it does not say exactly how much of this sulphur is used to make concrete. For a consumer to know this, he or she has to search for the information online which, possibly because Shell does not want the figures scrutinised, is vague or non-existent. As Friends of the Earth notes (2007b), Shell produced 323,000 tonnes of sulphur waste in 2005. But when it comes to finding information on how much of this sulphur is used to make concrete, there is none.

Shell’s response

Browsing Shell’s archived press releases for 2007 does not bring up any information regarding Shell’s response to the greenwash accusations. The *2006 sustainability report* also offers little help from Shell for an analyst seeking to confront and deconstruct the pro-environmentalists’ accusations of greenwash in “Don’t throw anything away”. In “Shell and ‘Flower Power’”, (Kanter, 2007), Kanter notes that in a conversation with Shell spokesperson Olga Gorodilina, he was told that Shell thought the advertisement was fair. According to Kanter, Gorodilina stated that the advertisement was meant to “help governments and industry and consumers ‘meet the energy challenge and the CO₂ challenge’”. Governments, industry and consumers are three interconnected yet separate bodies of stakeholders. Saying that the advertisement is meant to help all of these stakeholders “meet the energy challenge and the CO₂ challenge” is a form of responsibility-shirking that is possibly meant to divert accusations (see Joyner, 2005, p. 89) from the industry to governments or consumers.

Shell’s “Don’t throw anything away” advertisement quickly became a defining symbol of greenwash imagery. Earthfirst, an environmental watchdog, hosted its greenwash awards, called the “Climate Greenwash Awards”, on the eve of the World Business Summit in Copenhagen in May 2009. As the summit dealt largely with climate change, Earthfirst (2009) wanted to draw attention to the idea that it was nothing more than a green front for the attending corporations. Although Shell Oil came in second place in Earthfirst’s 2009 awards, behind the first-place “winner” Swedish energy giant Vattenfall, the image used for the awards sums up the seminal impact of Shell’s “Don’t throw anything away” advertisement among environmentalists—two years after its publication:



Source: <http://earthfirst.com/6-nominees-for-the-climate-greenwash-awards-2009/>

Conclusion

The Shell campaign considered in this analysis illustrates the complex nature of greenwash and its heavy influence upon advertising and public relations strategy. Shell's use of confusing, misleading, non-factual and deceptive language seems a purposeful attempt to convince consumers that the company believes environmental concerns to be just as important as oil profits. Key words such as "sustainable" indicate Shell's knowledge of the environmental movement's concerns and projects these back to target publics with the same flowery language (and images) with which environmental groups present wishful ideas on sustainability. However, this does not explain why Shell might produce what appears to be an obvious "greenwash" advertisement.

The "Don't throw anything away" advertisement was pulled in the United Kingdom following complaints from environmental agencies and as a result of the ruling of an advertising regulator. The effectiveness of this combination of environmental organisations and an advertising regulator is important to the anti-greenwash movement, as it can directly affect the circulation of misleading greenwashing claims. The process of adjudication and evaluation also adds a level of objectivity to the complaints of greenwash, since these have to be considered by a body established to regulate the professional practice of advertising, which has to hear from all parties involved prior to reaching a conclusion.

The advertisement adopted six of the seven elements of the greenwashing discussed in Terrachoice's *Seven deadly sins of greenwash* and illustrates Laufer's (2003) greenwash elements of posturing, confusion and front groups. It confirms the usefulness of these elements as helping to identify greenwash, supporting a growing body of anti-greenwash literature. The advertisement incorporated misrepresentation and a lack-of-proof into its language and images, as well as a careful positioning of empty statements. The visual claims of making flowers instead of smoke and concrete from sulphur waste coincides with Alves' idea that transnational corporations are accustomed to displaying "green" credentials in a largely unregulated market (2009, p. 3) and helps verify Conly's

(2009, p. 1) argument that greenwash largely centres around the adaptation of environmentalist terms. Shell's misuse of terms and images had already earned the company a "lifetime achievement award" in CorpWatch's Greenwash Academy Awards in 2002, and was also to earn a second place in Earthfirst's 2009 awards.

As this advertisement clearly meets the greenwash "criteria" mentioned throughout this paper, and was judged to be greenwash by the relevant professional body, it raises the possibility suggested in the research question that perhaps Shell predicted the greenwash controversy that its advertisement would create—at least to a degree—and operated according to the principle that there is no such thing as bad publicity. Indeed, the campaign may have been a meta-statement to the corporation's anti-green partners and shareholders that Shell has no truck with environmentalists, except insofar as they can be used to showcase, through controversy, the technologically experimental nature of the company. It is impossible to know whether this speculation is well-founded—Shell would never confirm or deny such a possibility. The alternative question is how well Shell can plan its advertisements if such "mistakes" can occur in executing its advertising and public relations priorities.

The impetus to controversy may actually represent a double-bind two-way communication model (Grunig & Hunter, 1984) going into effect between Shell and its publics. Shell could be using these advertisements to say one thing to the green lobby and another to people who put the making of unsustainable profits higher up the agenda than the environment. Such a view, although possibly cynical, would acknowledge the importance of controversy and greenwash as factors in an organisation's truthful communication with its publics. In other words, because the advertisement was exposed as a misrepresentation of an environmental claim, the truth about Shell was ultimately implied in its meta-communications with profit-preferring publics. This was only achieved through the exchanges between Shell, environmentalists and regulators.

Further research is needed to create a theoretical timeline of greenwash and to better understand companies' adaptations and responses to the growing sophistication of green communications. Future campaigns will continue to represent a complex application of literal greenwash tactics and, perhaps, more in-depth public relations strategies. It is not uncommon for organisations to allow "deviance to be attributed to them, in order to attain a different organizational order" (Hynd, 2001, p. 49). If this motive lies behind Shell's greenwash strategy, then the degree of communication between Shell and its publics is indeed much more complex than a one-way communication model suggests. The greenwash field consists of a range of discourses between publics—activists, polluting corporations, consumers, shareholders—and these discourses rely on the perception of information. This analysis has raised the possibility that advertisements such as Shell's rely on a reactive public to brand a corporate image. The reactive nature of greenwash and the controversy it creates depends largely on an awareness of greenwash strategies and literature, which involves this paper, and its audience in an ouroboros-like relationship—an ultimate image for recycling.

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