

Don't Get Stuck in the "Greenwashing" Swamp

Failure to be careful about language can lead to serious backlash. If you talk to marketers who are gun-shy about Green marketing, it's likely because they've been accused of "*greenwashing*": putting a Green spin on something that's not all that Green when you look closely. Companies or even whole industries that try that gambit can experience serious backlash, and then it becomes much harder to convince consumers that the company has begun to work seriously on Greening itself.

Look what happened to Nestlé after it ran an ad promoting one of its bottled water brands as an eco-friendly alternative in the Toronto Globe and Mail: five major environmental groups lodged an official complaint charging violation of the Canadian Code of Advertising Standards as well as environmental claims guidelines set by Canada's Competition Bureau and the Canadian Standards Association.

The legal complaint cites three claims in the ad:

- "most water bottles avoid landfill sites and are recycled";
- "bottled water is the most environmentally responsible consumer product in the world";
- "Nestlé Pure Life is a Healthy, Eco-Friendly Choice".

In the statement, the coalition said,

"Based on our review of the representations made by Nestlé Waters in this advertisement, it is clear that they are not supported by fact – we believe this is an outrageous example of greenwashing," says Beatrice Olivastri, Chief Executive Officer, Friends of the Earth. "The truth is that many water bottles are not being recycled, a phenomena that Nestlé Waters itself—in direct contradiction to its own advertisement – admits in its 2008 Corporate Citizenship Report." Olivastri points out that Nestlé Waters states in the report that many of its own bottles end up in the solid waste-stream and that many of them are not recycled even though they are recyclable.¹

Of course, Nestlé could have easily avoided the specific Canadian complaint (and resultant bad publicity) by being more careful in its copywriting. It wouldn't have helped with the growing perception that bottled water is inappropriate in most situations

¹ <http://csrwire.ca/article/1464/Friends-of-the-Earth-Canada/1-12-08-Nestl-accused-of-Greenwashing-Complaint-Filed-Today.html>, December 1, 2008

precisely because of its severe environmental consequences²—but rewriting the claims as

follows could have rendered this particular complaint moot:

- “*Many ~~most~~ water bottles avoid landfill sites and are recycled*”;
- “*bottled water ~~could be considered an is the most~~ environmentally responsible consumer product, especially in parts of the world where tap water is not safe to drink*”;
- “*Pure, clean water such as Nestlé Pure Life is a Healthy, ~~Eco-Friendly~~ Choice*”.³

² See, for example, Corporate Accountability International's "Think Outside the Bottle" campaign, <http://www.stopcorporateabuse.org/cms/page1131.cfm>

³ Even watering down the claims may not have been enough. Many environmental activists have been arguing that bottled water has serious negative environmental consequences, and that at least where tap water is safe, the environmental costs are unacceptable. See, for instance, <http://www.allaboutwater.org/environment.html>, among 99,600 citations returned in a Google search for ["bottled water" impact environment], April 12, 2009.