

Greenwashed truths?

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Barely a week goes by without some organisation claiming to be "green" and "eco-friendly."

Since this country claims to be "100% Pure New Zealand," what can one expect?

Governments and business tout their environmental credentials and, as polls show tougher times mean consumers give less weight to the environment now, "clean and green" still carries kudos.

Just this week, HP trumpeted customers including Vodafone New Zealand for "practicing environmentally sustainable imaging and printing."

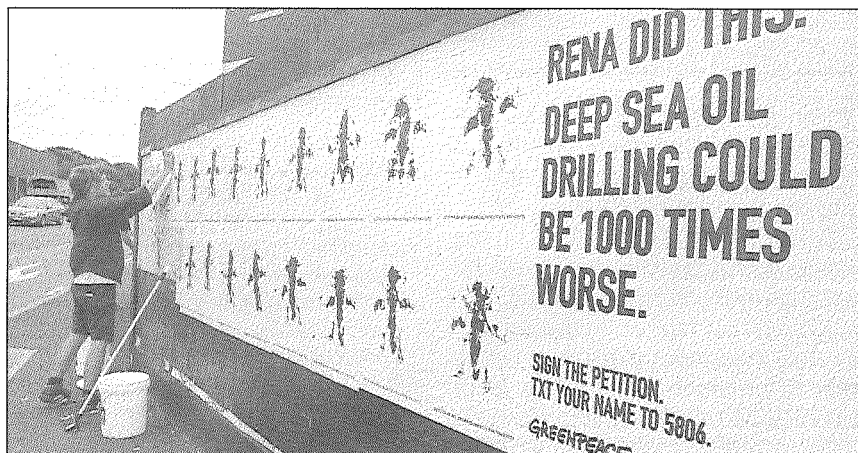
It followed the 2012 Best Global Green Brands report from Interbrand last month, which said companies were taking more action to improve and measure their sustainability performance.

New Zealand managing director James Bickford said the "planet" agenda was no longer a government or cause-related issue but one driven by consumers. It didn't matter who was to blame, all had to take action and brands were potent catalysts for change.

Mr Bickford said social media was boosting the power of the consumers, who would increasingly expect "green" products. Furthermore, efficiency saved money. Thus, sustainability would no longer be a "nice to have" but rather a necessity.

The best green brands would be expected to show more transparency and any greenwashing will damage brands. "The future is not about eco-friendly campaigns but creating and delivering green brands from the inside out," he said.

Mr Bickford cited Toyota and its Prius for making regular improvements in its energy use, water consumption, waste and toxic emissions. Johnson & Johnson had a focus on "social responsibility" as well as the environment. Danone was committed to reducing its carbon footprint by 2012 and had cut packaging. Nokia had boosted its recycling.



GREENPEACE CAMPAIGNS: But Kiwis are less interested in the environment in hard times

ASA and Commerce Commission patrol the claims

Both the Advertising Standards Authority and the Commerce Commission point to guidelines and laws concerning environmental claims.

Breaches of the Fair Trading Act can result in fines of up to \$60,000 for an individual and \$200,000 for a company.

ASA chief executive Hilary Souter said

organisations should not make absolute claims such as "environmentally friendly" but they can qualify them by saying "environmentally friendlier."

Such complaints were rarely made to the ASA, suggesting either the advertisers get it right, or people did not feel strongly enough about the issue.

Corporates, he said, could be agents of change to a sustainable future but it was up to consumers to drive for it.

Lachlan McPherson, partner at agency Publicis Mojo, which represents Greenpeace and Solar City, agreed tougher times meant sustainability was less important to consumers and perceptions of higher cost deter people from going solar. Consumers were switched on to green claims but corporates were less likely to use greenwash as they would be found out.

However, Mr McPherson believes Kiwis misunderstand Greenpeace over its work to stop toxic dumping in oceans and to help protect Antarctica.

"Having said that, I also think some of the tactics currently used by Greenpeace are not winning it any support with New Zealanders," he said.

Sustainability was on the agenda and most Kiwis believed the environment matters but people struggled to say what they had done themselves.

"If brands can help New Zealanders turn this belief into action, then that is a great start," he said.

Wright Communications represents "green" clients such as Toyota and Urgent Couriers, who undergo a certification process to be accepted by the agency.

"Any professional PR agency would refuse to court greenwash," managing director Nikki Wright said.

She accepted the environment was not a brand maker but most Kiwis did consider green issues when buying a product and they would get "annoyed" with companies trying to pass off products as greener than they really were.

However, by seeing how they could reduce overheads, for example, electricity, freight, waste, "going green" could help a business.

"Cost reduction is one of the drivers for business to cast a sustainability lens on their supply chains- especially in these recessionary times," she said.