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# Come clean about sustainability

**As going green becomes 'the new black' in marketing, Margaret Lawson urges the buyer to be doubly aware**

**W**ELCOME to another environmentally friendly day in our new, sustainable world. You awake to the sound of an alarm clock that is powered by green energy. You eat your eco-friendly cereal before driving to your paperless office in your carbon neutral vehicle.

You buy a novel at lunchtime and pay extra for the green bag. Back at the office, you plan a business trip and pay \$5 to offset your flight's emissions.

After work, you shout some of your colleagues a new, carbon neutral beer, before going home, feeling good about the fact that you've done your bit to help the environment today.

Or have you?

It's the latest and greatest thing in marketing — when selling a product, green is most definitely the new black.

We are bombarded daily with messages urging us to buy offsets and choose green-friendly products. Public consciousness about climate issues, raised through awareness events such as this week's Earth Hour, has led to the "green" factor becoming a key differentiating point for brands.

And it's now being applied to more products and services than ever.

Last month the first carbon neutral pub in Australia was launched, along with Australia's first eco-beer.

At least one bank offers a product where you can give them cash in return for carbon offsets that "neutralise" your household and car emissions. Airlines are on the bandwagon too, urging us to "fly carbon neutral".

The value of this global offset market was estimated at more than \$US120 million (\$131.5 million) in the first three quarters of 2006, and is predicted to rise by 500 per cent in

three years. Sales of green products in Australia are similarly on the way up.

But how much do we really know about what we're buying?

One of the most frequently asked **If a claim doesn't make sense or seems too good to be true, the message is 'don't buy'**

consumer questions about green power is how the green electricity gets into customers' overhead lines.

Clearly, as consumers rather than scientists, it's hard to know exactly what we're paying for.

Some companies have been taking advantage of this, leading to the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission recently announcing a crackdown on false green marketing. The watchdog is threatening fines of up to \$1.1 million for companies that mislead us with terms such as "green", "environmentally safe" and "carbon neutral".

This month, a supermarket chain agreed to place stickers over environmental claims on some of its tissue products after the validity of the statements was called into question.

The ACCC is also taking action for the "Switch to carbon neutral motor-ing" ads that ran last year for Saab.

The campaign — promoting a plan that 17 trees would be planted to neutralise the impact of each car — is alleged to have misled consumers into thinking they were buying a car that would be carbon neutral for life.

Unfortunately, carbon neutrality and other green jargon is in danger of becoming what "reduced fat", "low cal" and "high fibre" were in past decades. And green claims at present are unregulated.

Although some independent groups offer accreditation schemes for products such as green energy, most claims are not subject to oversight or review.

What is needed in this space is three-fold: greater consumer awareness, change at the regulatory level, and responsibility from communicators to disclose the limits of claims.

The ACCC, the Australian Conser-

vation Foundation and Choice have all released information online recently to help the public understand green terminology and make informed decisions when choosing from the many environmentally friendly products.

If a claim doesn't make sense or seems too good to be true, the message is "don't buy".

And when making big purchasing decisions, try to dig deeper than reading the promotional material. Read the company's social responsibility information online, or ask for it before giving them your dollars. You may be surprised at how many large corporations boast recycled packaging, while their own policies regarding office waste disposal and purchasing leave a lot to be desired.

But consumer education will only go so far to fix this emerging problem. Few of us have the time to read a technical explanation of reforestation before buying breakfast cereal. This is why greater regulation of green claims is necessary.

The same level of scrutiny that applies to the Heart Foundation tick should be introduced in Australia to oversee environmental claims.

If they knew that a program was well-run and credible, consumers would rely on its green tick of approval. And as a communicator, I would be proud to promote a product that had genuine accreditation backing its claims.

The most damaging part of the proliferation of bogus environmental statements is that they can cast doubt on the genuine progress being made by organisations that are doing the right thing.

As such, those of us in the communication industries need to take accountability for things we write and say about our employers and clients.

We too have obligations — an obligation to strive for authenticity, an obligation not to mislead and an obligation to promote organisations in a way that ensures they are "walking the walk" of sustainability as well as that they "talk the talk".

**Margaret Lawson is a communication consultant with national and international experience. She has worked on the marketing of carbon neutral and sustainability projects in the energy industry.**



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