GREEN WASHING A PERFECT DECEPTION FOR CONSUMERS: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

“It is a perfect deception when you can lie to yourself and believe it.” (Michelle Horst, Vaalbar, The Land Of Shadows). Consumers have always been surrounded by different schools of thought. At one side are the firms which are putting up their “green claims” where in they assert upon being environmentally conscious and walking on the path of sustainability and on the other hand is a totally different school of thought which brings forward the ugly reality of “Green Washing” where environmental devastation is promoted as sustainable growth to the consumers. For e.g. when the flat panel T.V.s replaced the T.v.s with picture tube they claimed to be totally lead free which is a toxic element whereas the truth is that they were actually green washing the fact that the flat panel T.V.s contain mercury bulb which is highly toxic itself.¹ And in the quest of promoting itself as a environmentally friendly organization the companies are not actually changing their own practices but are just acquiring smaller firms which are managing environmentally friendly practices. This case study tries to discusses the Green Washing deception for the consumers created by a big brand. Though the consumers are increasingly getting conscious about environmental safety but the companies still have a long way to go in the quest of becoming Green! Till then is it right to keep the consumers under deception?

Keywords: Washing, consumers, companies

INTRODUCTION

Green Washing is a term which was designed and for the first time used by Jay Westervelt, a US based environmentalist in 1986. It was actually used as a sarcasm to depict the hoteliers encouraging to use their towels more than once in order to save the environment instead of actually making an effort towards avoiding the wastage of water, unreasonable use of electricity, wastage of food, over use of wooden furniture which causes major deforestation.² [3]

March 2006, The Body Shop International Plc. (Body Shop), a retailer of natural-based and ethically sourced beauty products, announced that it had agreed to an acquisition by beauty giant L’Oréal in a cash deal worth £ 652 million.⁴ Since, its inception it had endorsed and championed various social issues such as opposition to animal testing, developing community trade, building self-esteem, campaigning for human rights and protection of planet earth. L’Oréal, on the other hand, had been severely criticized by activists for allegedly testing its cosmetics on animals, exploiting the sexuality of women and selling its products by making women feel insecure.⁵ Customers said that they felt betrayed. They called for a boycott of Body Shop’s products. It was also a major windfall for its founder Dame Anita Roddick.⁵

Body Shop was one of the first companies to publish its ‘Various Report’ in 1996. Through these initiatives, the company had cultivated a loyal customer base who shared these values of the company. Roddick had previously been quite bold and loud in her criticism of companies like L’Oréal. Body Shop was regarded as one among the first firms in the world to publish a proper report on its social responsibility initiatives. In addition to social activism, inat work internal audit programs were conducted at Body Shop for Environmental protection, health & safety at work and monitoring of ‘Against Animal Testing Policy’.

Body Shop in 1996, presented the European Union with a petition signed by over 4,000,000 people, which at the time was the largest petition against animal testing. They were instrumental in U.K. government’s decision in 1998 to ban animal testing for cosmetic products and ingredients. Later they were accused of being hypocrites. Some analysts felt that the acquisition was an attempt by L’Oréal to buy CSR. Many
big organizations have bought smaller model ethical corporations.

Talking about this shift in the paradigm where many multi-national giants tend to get associated with or even acquire the smaller companies which have adopted the green ways or sustainable options. Every consumer is now demanding credibility & sustainability and hence in the quest of boosting their sustainable / green image they do not actually change their own practices / policies but just acquire the smaller & greener ventures. One such example is the buyout of the environmentally progressive Vermont Icecream venture Ben & Jerry’s Inc.. And now the game is becoming never ending wherein the global giants are working hard to bring all such benevolent ventures under their umbrella. Another master of acquisitions is Nestle which has acquired a series of such companies one of them being Sweet Leaf Tea Co., acquired in 2011. Similarly, Colgate - Palmolive Company has acquired Tom’s of Maine Inc. in 2006 and Dean Foods Company bought Horizon Organic Holding Corporation under its umbrella in 2004. Such type of acquisitions not only help the big food giants and other multinational to remove the smaller competitors from the market but also help them in changing the customer perception by showcasing themselves as socially responsible and friendly towards the environment.

These kind of takeover can somehow help the organizations create a superficial impact on the image of the organizations and might help them give them a chance to declare themselves as socially responsible and sustainable with making any extra effort in their very own practices. Rob Straughan, associate dean of the Williams School of Commerce, Economics, and Politics at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia states that a company can really benefit well if and only if the new CSR practices and policy changes are acquired by the parent company after the acquisition. Hence these practices can only give a Green Washing Effect but no strength to the organization in their sustainable claims. And whom are we deceiving, our very own ‘Brand Loyals’?

According to the Sustainability Report, 2013 the consumers are ready to pay extra premium to the small businesses for the products which match their ideologies. But the problem that lies with them is that they cannot promote their firm and products that heavily due to shortage of funds as compared to the other giants which promote themselves to be green even if they are not as vigorously working towards green practices as the smaller businesses are. Recently a new term has been devised called as “Green Stickiness” which actually refers to the tendencies of the consumers to stick to the green brands but that doesn’t mean that this green stickiness can be acquired by acquiring green businesses. Consumers today are well informed of every company’s depth of involvement in green practices and hence they can differentiate between the genuine green practices and “Green Washing”. Hence, today no matter what justifications Body Shop may present but still it has surely lost all the claims on the green stickiness of its very own customers which made them it’s brand loyal. That is why an investigative article “Shattered Image: Is The Body Shop Too Good to Be True?” published in Business Ethics magazine led to a drop in the market size of Body Shop by 50% and in fact led to the growth hundreds of stories on the related matter covered by different magazines including the front page of the business section New York Times. Such controversies once fallen into are like a crack in a China Cup it can be fixed with the adhesive but the mark always remains.

And hence even though how much any organization tries to green wash it’s dark unsustainable mall practices it should be sure about a downfall because how far and how much you can deceive a consumer. That is why the title of this case study is so sarcastic calling Green Washing as a perfect deception for the consumers.

REFERENCES:
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