**The “Green” Hypocrisy: America’s Corporate Environment Champions Pollute The World**

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 *“Green is green as in the color of money”
- Brand director of General Electric, Brandweek, July 26, 2006*

“Greenwashing” is the act of misleading the public regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product, service, or business line.  Due to the public’s increased awareness of environmental issues, including global warming, deforestation, and the loss of endangered species, greenwashing has become a staple of corporations marketing efforts.  All of the companies in this article have made some effort to address these concerns.  Some of them appear to be trying harder than others, and even a few of them have made legitimate efforts to become responsible corporate stewards of the environment.  Evidenced by the support of environmental groups and corporate responsibility professionals, many of these companies’ green initiatives have made a positive impact.

A majority of America’s largest companies have become part of the “green” movement. Some have fleets of hybrid trucks. Others install solar panels on their large buildings to consume energy more cost effectively with less of an impact on the environment.  Many give generously to environmental non-profit organizations.

The irony of the “green” movement of US companies is that many of the firms that spend the most money and public relations effort trying to show the government, the public, and their shareholders that they are trying to improve the environment are also among the most prolific polluters in the country.  Pollution does not mean that the companies are doing anything illegal.  Instead, it simply refers to natural consequence of the companies’ industrial efforts which result in contamination to the air, soil or water by the discharge of substances that are toxic to the environment.

24/7 Wall St. has put together a list of the Top Ten Greenwashers in America.  There may be some large companies that are greater polluters than these firms.  There may be other corporations that do more to promote their pro-environment credentials.  But those can be counted on two hands.

Every company on this list makes a substantial investment in creating a perception that they are friendlier to the environment than their peers are or that they are on the side of good or that saving the global ecosystem should be part of a corporation’s broad public responsibility–its good citizenship.  These firms often spend millions of dollars on advertising to support the way that their companies are perceived in the green world.  But, hidden behind these efforts, each corporation on this list is a Herculean polluter.  And, that fact points to a hypocrisy which is almost completely hidden from the public.

In the process of creating this list, 24/7 Wall St. examined hundreds of state and federal documents and interviewed experts in environmental law, and officials who review data for non-profit organizations which have charters to track environmental violations.  We also reviewed annual reports from companies on their environment efforts.  It was important to balance all of these.  Some sources had axes to grind, but that was weighed in the process.
A more complete description of our methodology runs at the end of the article.

**1) General Electric (GE)**

In May 2005 GE announced its $90 million “Ecomagination” advertising campaign. According to Jeff Immelt, the company’s CEO, “Ecomagination is GE’s commitment to address challenges such as the need for cleaner, more efficient sources of energy, reduced emissions and abundant sources of clean water.”  The company said that revenue from 70 Ecomagination products and services would be $17 billion in 2008.  Since its inception, Ecomagination has provided GE with countless opportunities to reflect its corporate concern over the environment.  Arguably the whole effort is greenwashing.

On Super Bowl Sunday GE debuted its ad campaign for Smart Grid Technologies.  The premise behind this technology is that IT systems and products can make power grids more efficient.  The ad explains that “Smart grid technology from GE will make the way we distribute electricity more efficient simply by making it more intelligent.”  This will benefit the environment.  The more efficient our energy grid, the less power we use.  The less power used, the less carbon dioxide is emitted.  That GE used Super Bowl Sunday to launch this initiative is important, not only because of the huge sums spent for the advertising time, but also because it marked the first time that GE has bought time during the Super Bowl.

GE also launched a website to further create buzz around its efforts.  The online videos and interactive features include significant coverage about how the technology can be employed to better use alternative energy by improving the ability of the grid to deliver locally generated wind, sun and biogas power across the country.  The technology will also facilitate the purchase of energy generated by the consumer from systems like wind turbines and solar panels.  The cumulative effect of promoting the benefits that the technology will have on alternative energy is that it appears to equate the two.

The reality is that smart grid technology in one form is already required by 42 states.  Although alternative energy may benefit from this new service, there are myriad ways that it will improve consumer spending and carbon emissions without adopting better alternative energy efforts.  Ecomagination’s stated goal is to “meet customer demand for more energy-efficient products” by investing in “innovative solutions to environmental challenges.”  The character of this statement is fair, but it belies the company’s larger corporate identity and its history as one of the country’s worst polluters.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency’s Toxic Release Inventory (TRI), for the electrical equipment industry, GE was the fifth largest producer of chemicals with four facilities in the top 100 generating 332,336 pounds in waste in 2007.  In the miscellaneous manufacturing industry, GE’s GE Osmonics facility was the fourth highest producing facility of TRI production-related waste with 1,919,437 pounds. According to the University of Massachusetts Political Economy Research Institute (PERI), General Electric is the sixth most toxic company when considering the amount of population exposed to its pollution and its toxicity level from its plants.

According to the EPA, “From approximately 1947 to 1977, the General Electric Company (GE) discharged as much as 1.3 million pounds of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) from its capacitor manufacturing plants” at two facilities on the Hudson River.  The EPA says that “The primary health risk associated with the site is the accumulation of PCBs in the human body through eating contaminated fish.”  The EPA has found that the cancer risk from eating fish from the Upper Hudson exceeds the EPA standard by 700 times.

On December 4, 2001, the EPA issued a “record of decision” calling for the dredging of 2.65 million cubic yards from the upper section of the Hudson River to remove approximately 150 thousand pounds of PCBs.  According to the company’s website, “From 1990 to 2007 GE has spent over $1 billion in addressing PCB-related issues, with the majority of those expenses (82%) coming from just three sites” including the Hudson River.  However, Riverkeeper and other non-for-profit organizations focused on the environment contend that GE has stymied the government’s efforts to clean up the river and enforce the dredging requirement.  In 2008, Alex Matthiessen, president of Riverkeeper, stated that CEO, Jeffery Immelt “continues to be, as is GE, very defensive about the Hudson River cleanup.”

Each year the League of Conservation Voters publishes the “Dirty Dozen,” a program targeting candidates for Congress “who consistently vote against clean energy and conservation.”  Out of this list, GE’s PAC has donated thousands of dollars to six of the dirty dozen.  Additionally, GE’s PAC donated to two leading deniers of global warming, Senator Jim Inhofe, included in the Dirty Dozen list, and Congressman Joe Barton.

*Questions to Answer*:

1. What is “green-washing,” and why are corporations using this in their ad campaigns?
2. How have corporations made an effort to “go green?”
3. What is the irony behind the corporate green movement?
4. Explain in a few sentences what GE’s “Ecomagination” is.
5. Using at least two specific examples mentioned in the article, how has GE not kept their “Ecomagination” promise?
6. What is the Dirty Dozen, and why are they significant to GE?
7. As a consumer, what can you do to help ensure corporations GE practices what they preach?
8. Does this green-washing tactic surprise you? Why or why not? Does it surprise you that oftentimes they are untrue with their business practices? Why or why not?