

Greenwashing – a beginner’s guide

The Ultimate Guide to Looking Like You Care About Climate Change (Without Really Changing Anything), or

How to look good without spending much, doing even less and protecting your reputation



“**Greenwash** (verb) *transitive*. **a.** To mislead (the public) or counter (public or media concerns) by falsely representing a person, company, product, etc., as being environmentally responsible; **b.** to misrepresent (a company, its operations, etc.) as environmentally responsible.” – source Oxford English Dictionary¹.

Introduction

This guide is for individuals and businesses who don’t genuinely care about climate change but need to appear as though they do. It will help you **look good, instill confidence** in customers and stakeholders, and **position yourself as a sustainability leader**—all while avoiding the risks of greenwashing and ensuring minimal cost and disruption.

Use this guide to **navigate sustainability without actually changing**.

¹ Source: https://www.oed.com/dictionary/greenwash_v?tab=meaning_and_use

1. Language and Messaging



It is important to get this right. Your tone and the message you convey will establish you as being credible and caring. It will put you in a position of leadership and help to engage stakeholders, increase your customer base and manage regulation and oversight.

- **Make Jargon Work for You**

- Use terms like *sustainability*, *renewables*, *energy transition*, *minimising impact* without committing to anything.
- Avoid using terms like *carbon neutrality*, *net zero* and similar terms (see below) as they can expose you to risk (of being found out).
- Keep it vague—avoid specifics or timeframes.

- **The Risks of Carbon Neutral and Net Zero (and How to Mitigate Them)**

- These claims can be dangerous if taken seriously—learn how to hedge your language.
- Regulators are focusing on these labels and will begin setting standards for their use. You are putting yourself at risk – especially if there is an audit or calls for substantiation.
- Avoid legally binding commitments; always add “where possible” or “aspirational target.”

2. Minimising Cost and Disruption

You want to do as little as possible. It's inconvenient, expensive and disrupts what you do. Against this, you need to make it look like you are taking a leadership position and are taking climate change seriously.

- **Strategies for Continuing Business as Usual**

- Set long-term goals with no short-term accountability.

- Launch an internal committee that meets often but does nothing.
- Encourage staff to (as much as possible in their own time) engage in climate friendly activities like planting trees, working in community gardens and more. Supply them with branded merchandise (t-shirts, caps) to show your support.

3. Making Claims

- **Who Gives a Shit About Scope 3?**

- Ignore the full lifecycle of your emissions—focus only on the easy wins.
- If you must address it, publish an “exploratory roadmap” instead of taking action.



- **Blame It on the Supply Chain**

- Shift responsibility to your suppliers and partners.
- Frame inaction as a "collaborative effort in progress."

- **Obfuscate Everything Downstream (and Upstream)**

- Emphasise what happens within your direct operations, ignore the rest.
- If questioned, point to the complexity of tracking emissions.

- **Make It Someone Else’s Responsibility**

- Call for “stronger government action” while lobbying against it behind closed doors.
- Use the phrase “waiting for regulatory clarity” whenever necessary.
- Make claims like “we encourage our suppliers to adhere to the highest of sustainability standards.”
- Push responsibility upwards to the regulator and downwards to your customers. Example: *Airlines allow passengers to offset their emissions, rather than doing anything themselves.*

- **Highlight the Little Wins**

- Celebrate minor sustainability initiatives while continuing major emissions-heavy activities. Example: *Switched to recycled office paper while expanding coal investments.*

- **Follow the Herd**

- Wait until competitors make a move, then copy them. Note that if they get away with something, you can too.



4. Offsetting: “If They’re Cheap – Use Them Liberally”

- **The Perfect Way to Enable Business as Usual to Continue**

- Buy the cheapest offsets available—no one checks the quality anyway.
- Market it aggressively with emotional language and nature imagery.

- **Accreditation Is a Good Risk Management Tool (Even If It Means Nothing)**

- Certifications can protect you from criticism, regardless of their actual impact. Make sure your offsets have some sort of accreditation or tick
- Choose programs that sound impressive.
- Use terms like “high integrity”, “carefully selected projects”



- **The Benefits of Co-Benefits**

- Highlight vague social and environmental benefits to distract from weak carbon reductions.
- Example: *“Our offsets support local communities” (even if they don’t reduce emissions).*

- **Risk management**

Using offsets does carry some risk. The proliferation of low quality offsets, plus the many scandals and exposes have put the spotlight on offsets. Despite this, if managed carefully, they can still be useful.

- Diversify – select a portfolio of offsets rather than put all your eggs in one basket.
 - Make statements like “*we continually monitor and reassess our offset programs to ensure we maintain the highest of standards.*”
 - Focus on co-benefits (see above). They are much more measurable and tangible and can be used to defend low quality offsets.
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5. Imagery and Branding

- Use **lots of green** and **pictures of trees** to imply sustainability.
 - Feature **smiling children and diverse groups of people** in your marketing.
 - When in doubt, **add a wind turbine or solar array**—even if you don’t use renewable energy.
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6. Reputational Risk Management

If caught greenwashing, issue a statement about “an immediate investigation will be launched” and liberally use wording like “learning and growing.”

- **Protect Yourself – Who Cares About the Organisation?**
 - Ensure **personal deniability**—blame bad decisions on management.
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7. In Summary

- Say a lot without doing much.
 - Focus on perception over impact.
 - Avoid responsibility while maximising PR benefits.
 - Greenwash *just enough* to look good, but not enough to get fined.
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Disclaimer – May contain nuts!

We should insert one of those boxes which makes you accept t&c’s but it’s too difficult.