**Greenwashing Product Lab for Responsible Business Leadership**

Business leaders generally delegate the management of product labeling and promotion to marketing experts. As companies become increasingly cognizant of environmental practice as part of their corporate social responsibility, business leaders should consider how genuine and legitimate their company’s “green” practices are. In this active learning session, participants will question business messages and whether deceptive packaging and labeling is being used. The interactive lab activity allows participants to investigate the concept of greenwashing through partner work and debriefing. The activity has been used over five semesters and has withstood the “test of time”.

**Keywords**: Greenwashing, Labeling, Environmental Sustainability

**Introduction**

Students of business vary in their interest and concern for environmental sustainability. Organizations have been created to recognize companies for their green practices, help other companies establish or strengthen sustainable practice, and/or broaden the awareness of companies that perform poorly in the area of environmental practice. For example, *Newsweek Magazine* publishes its annual Green Ranking List where it “recognizes environmental performance of the world’s largest publicly traded companies” (Newseek Staff, 2017). The magazine also publishes the names of the corporations they found to score the lowest in environmental performance. Information from watchdog groups and organizations whose purpose is to recognize good or poor performance can be of interest to investors, potential employees, politicians, consumers, and the media.

This session takes the perspective that business leaders should be aware of truth in promotion, even if they are not in a marketing position. CSR is value based and responsible products and advertising is part of good business ethics. Students will consider the packaging and labeling of common products and determine if the manufacturer is being truthful and genuine.

The activity-based session is intended for instructors working with undergraduate OB or leadership students (domestic or global) but could be used with graduate students or students in other related fields of study.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

Research on the legitimacy of green initiatives found that consumers expect organizations to support corporate social responsibility and they admire and view organizations as more caring when they demonstrate care for the environment (Bortree, 2009). To alert consumers to their concern for the environment, promotion departments will often utilize greenwashing, “the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service” (Terrachoice, 2013). Ray Anderson of Interface Carpets described it as a “self-serving green veneer” used in hope that consumers will not take a closer look (Anderson, 2010, p. 15) However, watchdogs are looking for corporate deception by companies saying they are environmentally responsible, however what they promote and what they actually do may be two different things (Cramer & Karabell, 2010).

By using an active learning, in classroom labs, students have the opportunity to become more engaged, retain more of the content, be more motivated, potentially improve critical thinking skills, and personal interactions (Staff, 2015). Therefore, student pairs investigating the deceptive business practices of greenwashing will physically investigate common products to determine if facts are genuine or embellished on product packages and labels. After being introduced to the theoretical lens of symbolic interactionism, they will consider which (if any) aspects of the product address the “front stage” intended for consumers, versus the “backstage”, which is intended to be inaccessible to the consumer (Goffman, 1959). Symbolic interactionism will help student pairs reflect on why a company would greenwash and lead to creation of their own theory on the motives behind the deceptive practice.

**Learning Objectives**

The specific objectives of the Environmental Sustainability Lab are:

1. Identify seven specific aspects of greenwashing.
2. Complete a partner scoresheet of greenwashing “sins” for each product as described through reading the “Seven Deadly Sins of Greenwashing” by Terrachoice (2013).
3. Reflect with a partner on the motives for greenwashing.
4. Write a theory on the motives behind greenwashing and what can be done to educate the consumer.

The topic most relevant to the business students are that greenwashing exists and is a common business practice. From an ethical standpoint, the future business leaders will recognize the front, back stage of advertising, and identify the motives behind deceptive practice.

The most relevant message to business instructors from this activity is that it utilizes a somewhat rare interactive ethical activity. Students will enjoy reading the criteria of “sins” and then moving among 13 activity stations. They will likely be surprised that labels often have “fake” claims or emblems, stating certification of honors. For example, a container may be “green” or recyclable yet the contents may be highly detrimental to the environment.

**Exercise Overview**

In the university classroom, the activity works best when students do a pre-reading of “The 7 Deadly Sins of Greenwashing” found at <http://sinsofgreenwashing.com/findings/the-seven-sins/index.html>). The actual classroom exercise is abbreviated for the conference session. In the actual class, there is a ten-minute introduction to the activity where scoresheets are explained, and student pairs are formed. The students then engage in a 50-minute lab where they rotate among 13 stations. Finally, 15 minutes is devoted to reflection on the motives of manufacturers and theory development. As a follow-up, in the next class meeting, the student pairs will present their theories through brief oral presentations or alternatively creating and submitting a slide for an all class PowerPoint presentation.

The instructor tallies the results of the Seven Sins scoresheets to determine the “Most sinful” and “least sinful” of the products. These will be presented at the same class the greenwashing theories are presented. Debriefing will include the importance of ethical business leadership and identifying deceptive products, packaging, and labeling.

**Session Description**

In the proposed MOBTS session, I will provide the participants with an overview of the activity, a handout of the “Seven Sins” reading and a copy of the product scoresheet. This will be short because they will want to start scoring the products. Because of the abbreviated “class time”, the participants will only score products on three of the sins. After investigating the products at different stations around the room and recording results, I will lead a debriefing and announce the most sinful and least sinful product. An exploration of other ideas will take the remaining time. The session schedule is:

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| 10 Minutes | Explanation of activity, dissemination of handouts, partnering, explanation of stations |
| 10 Minutes | Pairs rotate among the stations in the room. |
| 2 Minutes | Pairs record their scores on a wall chart and return to the full group |
| 8 Minutes | Pairs record their scores on a wall chart, the leader determines the most and least “sinful” products in the room, debrief includes ideas from participants on uses of the activity. |

I will bring handouts for the participants and products for the stations in the room.

**References**

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