

ASSESSMENT OF GREEN CLAIMS IN MARKETING

Project Summary

In the past five years, the marketplace has seen a proliferation of “green” claims promoting environmental features or benefits of many consumer products, both in terms of number and variety. If green claims are ambiguous or misleading there is a danger that consumers may become cynical and resist buying products on environmental or ethical grounds. Defra’s Green Claims Practical Guidance (2003) for both consumers and businesses was developed to promote the creation and use of clear and credible environmental claims on products - this is currently being updated. Ahead of this, Defra wanted to assess the current ‘state of play’ by collating data on the frequency, type and specific terminology of green claims found on the TV, radio, internet, and in the press. In addition, this study held 5 workshops with advertisers and their agencies in order to gather their views on green claims; what claims and terminology they use and why, what evidence they use to make those claims and to gain feedback on the Green Claims Guidance.

Key Findings

The ‘State of Play’

- Adverts carrying a green claim made up 0.68% of all adverts sampled, however this figure rose to up to 2.7% for the most prominent sectors; automotive, energy and the public sectors.
- Green claims tripled in number between 2006 and 2007/8, although have fallen back since.
- 68% of claims were found in print media, mainly in the broadsheets, despite TV and internet accounting for a much larger segment of adverts as a whole. This suggests they are targeted at the upper segments of the market.
- Around 61% of green claims relate to a specific product or service, with around 21% relating to a company’s broader brand message. Many of the remainder are from public campaigns, e.g. encouraging the public to recycle more. These figures varied by sector.
- Around 63% of green claims are made in conjunction with another claim(s), e.g. around performance and/or cost in the automotive sector.
- 13% of adverts making 1 or more green claims identifies a third party organisation supporting the claim being made, e.g. through a logo or label.
- The general notion of ‘green’ was used most often in green claims to describe products (both goods & services). ‘Carbon’ was also frequently seen, but most frequently as part of ‘carbon footprint’ or ‘CO₂ emissions’. Terminology varied significantly by sector.
- 40% of adverts carrying a green claim do not compare their product to an alternative, or provide supporting information to back up the claim. 33% make a comparison e.g. “we emit less”, but generally don’t say what they are comparing themselves to. 19% provide more information and generally back this up with numbers e.g. “this has led to a saving of up to 100 tonnes of carbon”.

The Industry

- Green claims in marketing to date were felt to represent a ‘toe in the water’, many of which were felt to be quick wins that did not require product or brand shifts.
- Confusion for both consumers and the marketing industry, particularly around terminology, was still considered a barrier. Many marketers felt a ‘fear to tread’ with respect to green claims due to awareness of the brand damage that can be caused through negative publicity from poor claims.
- Attendees at the workshops were surprised at the relatively low number of green claims being made but were less surprised that they appear to have dropped in number since the recession.
- Many felt that the next wave of green claims would be less about quick wins and more about strategic decisions around how the brand ‘fits’ with environmental responsibility.

- Awareness of Defra's Green Claims Code and Practical Guidance was low and it was felt that it should fit more visibly with other codes in this area. It was also felt that the Guidance says too much about what *not* to do, instead of positive guidance.
- The content of the Guidance was described as satisfactory but dry. Attendees suggested it be made more accessible and engaging, and that more case study examples and sector specific advice be included.
- The researchers felt that there was eagerness among attendees to stay involved in the process, and that there was broad support for initiatives that lead to greater standardisation and benchmarking. Workshops with Defra and trade bodies were seen as a useful way of engaging the marketing industry.

Researchers' Suggestions

- There is research needed to find out which of the many new terms currently seen in adverts are most effective in encouraging consumers to buy sustainable products.
- Defra should redefine its role solely as a provider of insight and guidance, especially in defining the terms used in green claims and the ways in which they should be supported or backed up.
- The Guidance should be redeveloped into an online 'Toolkit' for ease of access and use. Defra should consider holding a yearly workshop to bring marketers together to discuss current issues.

Methodology

The bulk of the statistical analysis was from a sample of 4,083 adverts identified from the Xtreme Information Database using 40+ search terms, such as 'green' and 'environmentally friendly'. 1000 of these were randomly selected for further analysis to provide further information e.g. on terminology. 5 stakeholder workshops were held, divided into industry sectors ('energy & utilities'). 143 delegates attended; the vast majority from brand communication agencies and client marketing companies.

Robustness

The sample size for the statistical analysis was very large and from multiple forms of media, so should be considered robust. The delegate workshops were well attended by a range of stakeholders, and so should also be considered robust.

Limitations

It is important to note that the categorisation of an advert in the Xtreme Database will determine whether it was included in the 4,083 adverts sampled. Also, while the Database records all adverts, it does not note how often they are shown, so cannot reflect a consumers 'exposure' to green claims, only the total number in different adverts. It is also important to note that the information and opinions gathered from the stakeholders involved in this study will not cover the full range of expertise and opinions on this issue.

Further Information

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Full report: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/business/scp/evidence/theme2/products0910.htm>