

## **A brushstroke of green with greenwashing**

*As customers have become more environmentally aware, the temptation for corporate marketing functions to give their commercial communications a green brushstroke has grown proportionally.*

Literally, the term is a syncreation of the words green, green, and washing, and originated in the 1980s because it referred to the multiple and continuous washing of towels in US hotel rooms with high consumption of water, detergents and energy. In reality, it was a communication gimmick of the large hotel chains to give an environmental justification to what was, instead, a simple expedient to reduce running costs.

Even when referring to the word whitewash, which can also be translated as 'cover', 'conceal', 'erase', the substance does not change: greenwashing has always been, a practice of mystifying reality. In the 1990s, the term was used to describe the communication of large American oil chemical companies, such as Chevron or DuPont, which tried to present themselves as environmentally friendly industries, despite the considerable damage caused to people and the environment by their polluting activities.

Obviously, as customers' attention to the issue of environmental protection has grown (after the Covid pandemic it has even exploded) there has been a proportional increase in the temptation for corporate marketing functions to give their commercial communications a green brush. And very few companies have shown themselves capable of resisting this temptation, especially the largest ones, demonstrating that internal dynamics increasingly see the prevalence of attention to the market, rather than attention to customers (and the truth). Examples are not lacking in the world, but also in Italy. In addition to the cases of the American oil companies, already mentioned, among the most clamorous is that of Coca-Cola Life which, a few years ago, spoke of its soft drink as a low-calorie product due to the presence of stevia (a vegetable product with a sweetening power 250 times higher than sugar) instead of sugar.

In Italy, cases of greenwashing fall within the hypothesis of 'misleading advertising', the supervision of which is entrusted by the Consumer Code to the Italian Competition and Market Authority (AGCM) which, at the outcome of its assessment (which can be activated ex officio or on the report of any citizen), can prohibit further dissemination and/or impose fines of up to EUR 5 million. Nevertheless, cases of domestic greenwashing have not been lacking. To cite just a few of the cases ascertained and sanctioned by the AGCM, among the best known is the Ferrarelle ad that advertised the 'zero impact' bottle by promising to compensate for the CO2 emitted by protecting new forests (on this subject, see my articles 'When sustainability is for sale', here <https://www.climateaid.it/2023/10/12/quando-la-sostenibilita-e-in-vendita/>, and 'First I pollute, then I repent and self-indemnify', here

<https://www.climateaid.it/2023/03/16/prima-inquino-poi-mi-pento-e-mi-autoassolvo/> ). But, in reality, the CO2 was not at all fully compensated and Ferrarelle was condemned. This was also the case for Eni, which had defined its own diesel as 'green diesel', contrary to the truth, according to the findings of the Authority, which ordered Eni to stop using the advertisement and ordered an administrative fine of €5 million for unfair commercial practice 'equal to the maximum edictal amount, taking into account the gravity and duration of the violation'.

According to the definition of the Italian law, advertising falls under 'commercial practices between professionals and consumers' and, therefore, one can incur greenwashing with 'any action, omission, conduct or statement, ..., made by a professional, in relation to the promotion, sale or supply of a product to consumers'. Packaging and labelling are also included, as is any form of communication: print, visual, radio, traditional media, social, web, etc.

Lately, ClimateAid Network and Acu Associazione Consumatori Utenti, after the report of greenwashing of Poste Italiane's advertisement, which prompted it to change its advertising (you can find the info in <https://www.climateaid.it/2023/06/15/greenwashing-1-abbiamo-vinto-poste-modifica-la-pubblicita/>), have reported to the AGCM 20 companies that produce and/or sell energy in Italy, which claim to be able to bring green electricity from only renewable sources to their customers' homes. In reality, in Italy, if energy is not self-produced, it is always fed into a grid that arrives at home and is composed of a mix of energy from fossil and renewable sources, both Italian and foreign.

Will this also be greenwashing? We await the response of the AGCM.

**Giuseppe d'Ippolito**