



The terms greenwashing and greenhushing have been borne out of the sustainability step-change that we're seeing society embrace on a global scale. But what do they mean, and is there a danger that a fixation on these buzzwords — however important — risks stalling the progress our planet so desperately needs? Gary Moore, sales director at UNTHA UK, explores...

Green marketing is a massive topic right now, with organisations large and small keen to convey what they're doing to protect our planet. This seismic shift stems from a more widespread global commitment to sustainability and growing recognition for the fact that we are all responsible for climate change, not just policy makers at government level — and even they could do more, as I'm sure we'll all agree.

A recent [article from CNN](#) goes so far as to state that: "It's never been more profitable for a company to go green, and by 2030, the global green technology and sustainability market is expected to be worth \$417 billion." There can definitely be no denying that this is a big business.

The greenwashing spotlight

But this surge in environmentalism has generated a worrying by-product — greenwashing. A number of less scrupulous brands are 'jumping on the bandwagon', so to speak, and leveraging language such as "renewable", "eco-friendly", and "plastic-free", to attract consumer attention, boost their reputation, and enhance market share, often without the evidence to back up their green claims.

In some instances, this behaviour will unquestionably form part of an intentional marketing ploy, while there are undoubtedly other examples where brands simply don't yet have enough knowledge to support their pledges. Not being armed with all the facts may seem irresponsible, but let's face it, most of us are continually learning, so we have to trust that sometimes, there has been no ill intent.

Let's think about some anecdotal examples. There is little point people investing in compostable cups for instance, if they are not segregated for appropriate next-step treatment. However, it could be argued that there's a notable difference between a cafe talking about their commitment

to using sustainable disposable items, but not yet knowing how to fully realise the resource value of their green choices, and high street brands widely promoting climate-friendly investments, while knowingly omitting details about their involvement in other pollutant-heavy activities.

This is a complex subject, but whether deliberately disingenuous or not, the result in simple terms is that the public ends up being misinformed. This is one of the primary drivers behind landmark steps to legislate against greenwashing. The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has also helpfully developed a Green Claims Code to help businesses sense-check the validity of their content.

A long-standing but rising challenge

But just because greenwashing is such a hot topic, doesn't mean that this is a new phenomenon. In fact a [Circular article](#) from 2021 reported that 43% of employees — even then — believed their company had been guilty of greenwashing behaviour. However, the more this term hits the headlines, the more we're naturally now talking about it — and rightly so.

Yet I do have a rising worry — that some well-intentioned brands may become so scared about how they talk about their sustainable practices and passions, that they simply don't say anything at all. I don't seem to be alone in these fears either, with a growing number of people also talking about greenhushing — a term first coined by a consultancy called Treehugger, a few years ago, which in simple terms, means businesses remain quiet on all-things-sustainability.

The danger of greenhushing

The outcome of this comparatively silenced approach could of course be that brands avoid scrutiny if they were to get anything wrong, which is no doubt what many will be trying to ensure. But what about if customers misinterpret such a lack of conversation as that organisation being dismissive of commitment or transparency? The reputational impact could be huge.

I also fear that if we grow to become so worried about not getting something right, then the brands who do have authentic things to say will stop talking completely — and that could dampen the progress we're able to achieve.

This is a multi-layered subject, and not one that can be remedied in a few hundred words. In fact I have lots more to say on the topic. However, I suppose the sentiment of my point is that I hope we do keep talking, sharing knowledge, praising innovations, and trying to break new ground. I don't think any organisation in the world can — or should ever try — to profess that they've got all bases covered when it comes to sustainability. At UNTHA, we've been passionate about the environment for over 50 years, for example, and I feel like we're only just scratching the surface of what we can and should be doing. But I think our hunger to never stop is exciting — and I know that I certainly want to keep hearing from other businesses, large and small, who are advancing in their efforts.

Perhaps a takeaway point is that there are lots more green terms coming to the fore, such as 'greenlighting' — arguably a diversion tactic that distracts attention from more damaging practices, a pass-the-buck style 'greenshifting' tactic which offloads blame to others, and 'greenrinsing' which sees brands adjust ESG targets before they're achieved, to skew performance perceptions. There are others too, and I think we should try our best to understand them all, if we're to remain authentic in our attempts to push forward.

I'd even like to throw another into the mix — greenkeeping — where we commit to being as responsible as we can, ensure we walk the talk, and never become complacent when it comes to our behaviour, as there'll always be more we can do. But maybe if we continue to 'tend to' our green efforts, we'll keep moving forward while ensuring others benefit from what we sow. And that's surely what it's all about...