



BSR Conference 2008 | Sustainability: Leadership Required Greenwashing: Hung Out to Dry

Breakout Session Summary

Thursday, November 6, 2008 | 2-5 p.m.

Speakers

- **Doug Bannerman**, Senior Manager, Advisory Services, Business for Social Responsibility
- **Erin Carlson**, Company, Director, Yahoo! for Good
- **Colleen Chapman**, Director of External Affairs, Starbucks Coffee Company
- **Jeffrey Hollender**, President and Chief Inspired Protagonist, Seventh Generation
- **Peter Madden**, Chief Executive, Forum for the Future
- **Lucy Shea**, Strategy Director, Futerra
- **Joel Makower**, Cofounder and Chairman, Greener World Media (moderator)

Highlights

- When creating credible communications, it is important to be transparent and focus on material issues.
- Provide consumers with information that they are interested in—as opposed to the information a company wants to show—in a way that is tailored, relevant, and useful.

Memorable Quotes

- “Materiality, balance between good and bad stories, consistency, and humility—these are the things you want to see in your [sustainability] reports.” —Doug Bannerman, Business for Social Responsibility
- “It all boils down to context. Green communication is only as good as the context in which it is presented.” —Joel Makower, Greener World Media
- “The more we’re honest [and] the more risk we take on disclosure, the better it is for our business.” —Jeffrey Hollender, Seventh Generation

Overview

In the first portion of the session, Hollender spoke about the need for transparency and the willingness from companies to talk about its shortcomings as well as its victories. He emphasized the importance of context—that a company cannot make claims about a product outside of the context of that company’s suite of products and activities.





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Chapman then spoke about Starbucks's focus on ethical sourcing and environmental footprint, acknowledging the difficulty in balancing Starbucks's investments between projects with the biggest carbon impacts—such as energy efficiency—with projects that are most visible to customers, such as recycling.

Makower then asked panelists to give tips on consumer communications, reports, online communications, and labeling. Shea explained the “10 signs of greenwash”—to be published in a forthcoming joint report from Futerra and Business for Social Responsibility (BSR)—including fluffy language and irrelevant claims. She then presented three opportunities for green communications: issue based campaigning; giving consumers useful, applicable information; and creating and communicating about products and services.

Bannerman then spoke about sustainability reporting, emphasizing the importance of humility in a report and advising against the use of superlatives. He added that sustainability reports should include forward-looking information, such as goals and plans around sustainability, and be consistent with other communications like a company's website and annual financial report.

Next, Carlson presented findings about online advertising from Yahoo! The first was that 77 percent of consumers say they care about the environment and are taking some action. This number indicates that there is a need to tailor messages to sub-segments of green consumers, such as trendy young consumers or mothers who care about the health and safety of their families. Secondly, she stated that of the two thirds of customers who go online to search for product information, most look at portals such as Yahoo!, search engines, and user reviews, not expert reviews, company websites, or blogs. She advised partnering with portals and optimizing searches to take advantage of these consumer habits and preferences.

Finally, Madden spoke about labeling, including the confusing proliferation of labels. He offered tips for labeling, including first eliminating products with bad standards, and providing consumers with information (such as how to best dispose of the product after use), all of which empower consumers to not only make choices, but use products in sustainable ways. He closed by predicting three trends for labeling: the convergence of various labels; the incorporation of technology, such as RFID, to simplify the green shopping experience; and the rise of labels that apply to the whole store, rather than individual products, to eliminate the need for product level labeling.

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