

Is the truth the whole green truth?

When one company says it's saving a thousand tonnes of carbon dioxide a year and another with a similar product says it is saving a million tonnes, how can you tell which one is doing more for the environment? The answer is that you can't, because both companies are probably guilty of 'greenwash'.

To most of us these kind of green statements are meaningless; what we really need to know is the reduction in CO₂ emissions per unit of production because showing a cut in total CO₂ could just be the company making fewer products. Also a company talking about tonnes of CO₂ saved may be trying to mislead or else they don't appreciate environmental best practice.

Common standards will need to be applied to help us to make proper comparisons of green claims, also companies will need to make it clear whether their environmental commitment covers all their range of products. Hopefully one day assessing the environmental commitment of a company will be as easy as looking at the coloured 'energy efficiency' label on a fridge or washing machine.

In 2009 Coca Cola launched a new type of bottle partly made from plant material. What seems like a massive two billion of these PlantBottles are due to be produced by the end of 2010 but bearing in mind that Coca-Cola makes 580 billion drinks a year this actually means that a mere 0.3% of Coca Cola's drinks will come in a PlantBottle this year. Despite this maximum publicity has already been achieved by providing the new bottles at high profile events such as the Copenhagen climate change summit and the Winter Olympics in Vancouver. Recognising that all great ideas need to start somewhere and need to be tested, we must all hope that after the headlines and pictures for the corporate social responsibility report, the incentive remains for Coca Cola to continue with this initiative, particularly if it's more expensive than before.

By the end of 2010 Premier Inns will have opened two "green hotels" with a carbon footprint 70% lower than standard hotels. Most of the savings come from using ground-source heat pumps, which provide hot water, heat and cooling. The pumps are expensive to install but pay for themselves in ten years through lower energy bills. Premier Inns commitment to the environment will be properly demonstrated if it pledges to install heat pumps in all 580 of its hotels. At the moment these green hotels are as limited as PlantBottles in terms of the proportion of the business they cover.

Honest statements about green initiatives will help overcome some cynicism. Honda has been very clear saying it will sell around 200 hydrogen fuel-cell cars, out of a total of more than ten million cars, and most of the new eco-cars will be given to celebrities (Jamie Lee Curtis has already received hers). Obviously this type of car won't become a common sight on our roads in the next couple of years, but Honda wants to persuade drivers and governments that zero-emission motoring really is achievable in the next two decades.

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