

# THE GREAT GREENWASHING

How brands, governments and influencers are lying to you

John Pabon

Saving the planet is big business.

Realising this, savvy companies are hopping on the sustainability bandwagon. Some may have altruistic ends in mind, but most want to make a quick buck. As ethical spending and consumer options increase, greenwashing is not only proliferating—it's also becoming harder to discern.

But how is someone at the supermarket supposed to decipher all this?

In *The Great Greenwashing*, John Pabon pulls no punches in arming consumers and business professionals with the tools they need to educate themselves, filter out the BS from the truth, and make a positive impact.

*Now's not the time to take prisoners or pussyfoot around the issues. In this game, you've got to be brave enough to name and shame.*

*For too long, many of the companies, governments, and individuals claiming to do the most are nowhere near walking their talk. They've put up beautiful window dressing to distract from all the horrible stuff happening inside their houses. Behind the scenes, these groups' actions hold back the very progress they claim to support. We've been treated like fools, falling into the trap of believing their lies and refusing to question their sincerity. Greenwashing is the result.*

Saving **THE** planet is big business. Realising this, savvy companies are hopping on the sustainability bandwagon. Some may have altruistic ends in mind, but a **GREAT** many just want to make a quick buck. As ethical spending and consumer options increase, **GREENWASHING** is not only proliferating—it's also becoming harder to discern.

Now, more than ever, you need to be on the lookout for how brands, governments and influencers are lying to you.

JOHN PABON

## The Author

John Pabon has spent two decades in the business of saving our Earth. After leaving his role at the United Nations, he travelled the world studying the impacts of sustainability first-hand in factories, on fields, and in Fortune 500s.

John is a globally recognised expert in sustainability. His career has taken him from Los Angeles to New York, Shanghai to Seoul to Melbourne. He has worked with the United Nations, McKinsey, A.C. Nielsen, and as a consultant with BSR; the world's largest sustainability-focused business network. A decade of experience living and working in Asia inspired him to found strategic communications firm Fulcrum Strategic Advisors, with a mission to help companies, governments, and individuals capitalise on the benefits of sustainability.

John is a regular contributor to major publications such as CNN, EuroNews, and the ABC. He also speaks to an array of global audiences on issues of sustainability, geopolitics, communications, and societal change. He is on the Program Director for The Conference Board's Asia Sustainability Leaders Council, a member of the United Nations Association of Australia, and serves on the board of advisors to the U.S. Green Chamber of Commerce.

He is excited to be helping consumers make smarter, greener decisions in his book *The Great Greenwashing*.

**On how to spot greenwashing**

Luckily, corporations aren't as smart as they think they are. As insidious as it is, greenwashing can often be very easy to spot.

Modern-day greenwashing comes in many forms. Firstly, you've got your blatantly false claims, like how Chevron continues to push how environmentally friendly it is. Then, there are misleading labels that do little to support their claims. Some companies swap out one good for one bad, like sweeping the child labour in Bangladesh under the rug because you've given to a children's charity in Zimbabwe. Irrelevant claims also pop up, whereby company X will say their products don't have a specific chemical but fail to mention that regulations have already banned that particular chemical. They didn't do anything themselves. They're simply following the law. Last, but not least, are products doused in the colour green. Just because it looks environmentally friendly on the package doesn't mean it is. How dumb do they think we are?

**On greenscamming**

If you thought companies lying on their packaging or misdirecting you with a few dodgy stats was terrible, just wait until you hear this. Some cashed-up companies, organisations, and individuals are known to go out of their way to actively discredit sustainability. These actions go far beyond simple greenwashing and enter the territory of greenscamming. Greenscamming is a concerted effort to capitalise on sustainability by bringing about its downfall. Any information, science, or people getting in the way of achieving a particular end goal are hostile combatants. As you'll soon see, the lengths greenscammers will go to boggles the mind.

The poster child of greenscamming is the fossil fuel industry. For years, they have called into question the validity of climate change and climate science. Only recently have we discovered just how deep this conspiracy goes.

**On the defence industry**

... Sustainability and profitability are not strange bedfellows to me. Seeing higher capital costs and decreased competitiveness as a reason for change is totally realistic. I'm not a pacifist. Nor am I dovish when it comes to issues like defence. What I take issue with, however, is the positioning these firms take concerning sustainability. We know you can't be sustainable, so don't try to angle yourselves as such. You can green your operations where possible, but don't think for a minute that makes you an ethical industry. Having the least polluting rocket launchers doesn't negate the fact you still produce rocket launchers.

Over the next century, we'll also see increased resource scarcity. What happens when a country doesn't have enough food or access to water? It starts to fight with its neighbours to get that resource. I can guarantee the defence industry will be there to provide the weapons in those fights. Thus, they exacerbate the very problem they pretend to care about.

**Innovating the private sector**

As companies continue to evolve and become more sustainable organisations, the available space for greenwashing will increasingly shrink ... innovation will drive competition. But unlike the traditional capitalist dog-eat-dog scenario, this innovation will place the private sector in a virtuous cycle. They will innovate to be better. By marrying profit with planet, they will see how lucrative, differentiated, and competitive they can be. They'll also reach a critical mass where companies that don't play ball will no longer have a role.

Private-sector companies on the vanguard have already laid solid foundations followers can build off. Whether that's completing the research necessary to green the auto sector, developing happy, healthy, productive employees, or building diverse boards to drive innovation forward, the solutions exist. There is absolutely no reason to reinvent the wheel. The work now is for companies that may be late to the party to jump in and get started.

**On fast fashion**

... as much as we think fast fashion has always been a part of life, this couldn't be further from the truth. Much like humanity itself, fast fashion is just a blip on the historical radar. As I said, we're less than one generation removed from seasonal, made-at-home clothing. This isn't to say I want us all to go back to our Singer Sewing Machines and start churning out clothes. Instead, there's no reason we can't have a bit more balance than what we see today.

... When these retailers push their greenwashing messaging, consumers feel they're doing good through their purchases, regardless of legitimacy. Why wouldn't I buy those jeans knowing part of the proceeds goes to some random charity in Africa? I'm getting a great deal and supporting a good cause. See, fast fashion isn't all that bad! Yet throughout this book, you'll see how often these messages are full of half-truths and obfuscated details.

**On the United Nations**

Without the UN ... I doubt the world as we know it today would even exist. So the organisation deserves all the praise we can muster for accomplishing its intended mission.

But that doesn't mean it is fit for purpose when it comes to pushing for the kind of change we need to save our planet today. As we've seen, the status quo is the enemy. In trying to stay the same, we're swiftly going backwards. Perhaps the UN can change so it's more in line with the demands of the twenty-first century. Based on my experience, even if that were to happen, it would take a very long time. So then maybe there are other organisations out there that should be front-and-centre when building a sustainable future. As it stands, however, the United Nations, its environmentally focussed bodies, and all the work within them haven't accomplished what we thought they should. To continue placing our trust in them is only a delusion.