


Chapter 11

From Greenwashing to Genuine Sustainability: Ethical Marketing in the Age of Conscious Consumers

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of conscious consumerism has compelled brands to adopt a more thoughtful approach, ensuring that their entire marketing practices align with issues concerning sustainability, inclusivity, and ethical responsibility. And yet the paradox of 2025 is that, even as consumers clamor for ethical branding more than ever, we see record levels of corporate greenwashing, too. In this chapter, we analyse the paradox of performative ethics and authentic sustainability marketing that emerges when looking at the trajectory of marketing ethics from its origins to current overall coherence or divergence between theory and practice in our global world. The conversation is informed by recent examples from a range of industries, from Volkswagen’s “Dieselgate” and H&M’s “Conscious Collection” to Patagonia’s radical transparency, Dove’s inclusivity campaigns, and Nike’s social justice activism that illustrate how greenwashing erodes consumer trust while genuine sustainability becomes a source for loyalty, resilience, and cultural relevance.

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INTRODUCTION

The ethical marketing paradox of 2025 is jolting: People want sustainable, responsible products like never before; companies are playing fast and loose with greenwashing and performative ethics more than ever. On the one hand, companies are becoming aware of the reputational and economic premium attached to their brands being linked to sustainability and social good (Bhasin, 2025). On the one hand, such measures cannot win over consumer's trust, while on the other they are almost daily countered by new scandals about false advertising, exaggerated pledges and superficial gestures (Dragomir, 2019; Perry et al., 2024). This cognitive dissonance highlights a tenuous relationship between marketing as an agent of positive transformation and marketing at the root of public skepticism. These dynamics have only been amplified by the growth of conscious consumerism, especially among Millennials and Gen Z (Tarnanidis, et al., 2026) These are not only sharp, values-orienting cohorts, but also ones who has been increasingly able to question brands ethical positioning through digital tribunals and activist networks (Briffault, 2025; Kaufman et al., 2020; Pardinias, Lepetit & Valette-Florence, 2018). For them, marketing is no longer confined to product features but the extent to which a brand truly reflects in practice these values of transparency, inclusiveness and sustainability. As McEachern and Carrigan (2012) note, ethical consumerism is frequently bound up with cultural identity or personal values this legitimacy in marketing becomes particularly important in today's market culture. But as the demand for authenticity continues to rise, a gap in trust has been opened (Durand-Hayes, 2024). Sixty four percent of global consumers believe that brands should make it easier to help them, for example by offering information or tools to address environmental and social issues, yet only 31% think businesses are doing so (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2025). Scepticism of corporate information is also seen as one of the major barriers that brands will face in their attempts to build loyalty (Source: PwC 2024 Voice of the Consumer Survey). If marketing overpromises or hides vital information, the consequences can be significant: consumers are more and more vocal about what they perceive as hypocrisy online, NGOs challenge legal action and regulatory bodies apply ever stricter penalties for misleading sustainability claims. The truth is this, abolitionists performing ethic meets capitalism in marketing and advertising. Greenwashing from ambiguous eco-labels to exaggerated carbon-neutral promises has emerged as one of the most common ethical challenges in the arena (Dragomir, 2019). The H&M "Conscious Collection" litigation alleging the company embellished its green accomplishments demonstrates how such performance art can squander credibility (Perry et al., 2024). By contrast, firms such as Patagonia are working to build consumer trust by infusing sustainability into the end-to-end value chain, developing circular business models and operating with radical transparency

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