

How Frames in Communications affect Perceptions of Corporate Greenwashing

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Introduction

Climate change mitigation calls for significant reductions in the amount of CO₂ emitted to the atmosphere. One way to achieve this reduction is implementation of CO₂ capture and storage technology (CCS).

Several industrial organizations invest in the development of CCS but face a dilemma when it comes to communicating their investment to the general public. On the one hand, organizations may frame their communications in ways so the general public learns that the investment in CCS is motivated by the positive environmental consequences associated with CCS. This could lead to a better corporate image (e.g., Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). On the other hand, organizations may be reluctant to communicate an environmental motive for their investment out of fear for accusations of *corporate greenwashing* (i.e., presenting themselves as “greener” than they are). This research examines how different types of organizational communications affect public perceptions of corporate greenwashing.

Methods and results

In three experiments, we manipulated the motive of a (fictitious) energy company (“BO&G”) to invest in CCS developments. All experiments followed the same basic procedure. First, participants were presented with background information about CCS and were informed that BO&G invested in it. Then, participants read a page of BO&G’s website containing the manipulation of the motive for investing in CCS. Depending upon the experimental condition, this motive was either economic or environmental. In addition, a control condition was included in which no motive was communicated. Perceptions of corporate greenwashing were assessed (Experiment 1, 2, and 3), as well as strategic beliefs (Experiment 2 and 3), and

general skepticism toward organizational communications (Experiment 3).

All experiments showed that people perceived less corporate greenwashing in the economic-motive condition, as compared to the environmental-motive condition and the control condition. Furthermore, Experiment 2 showed that strategic beliefs (i.e., to what extent people think the company has strategic intentions) mediated the effect of communicated motive on perceived corporate greenwashing. Experiment 3 showed that skepticism toward organizational communications moderated this indirect effect. That is, highly skeptical people were not influenced by communicated motive. It appears that these people are always skeptical about intentions, no matter what motive is provided.

Discussion

Energy companies apparently have a hard time convincing people that they are not merely investing in environmental measures for purposes of looking “green”. Yet, building public support for corporate policies about environmental issues requires avoiding accusations of corporate greenwashing. Our research shows that these accusations may be avoided by communicating an economic motive for investments in environmental measures.

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References

- Sen, S., & Bhattacharya, C. B. (2001). Does doing good always lead to doing better? Consumer reactions to corporate social responsibility. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 38, 225-243.