THE REAL REWARDS OF GREEN CERTIFICATION

Enabling sustainability beyond greenwashing

In modern sustainability-conscious society, product manufacturers and service providers rely on the stamp of certified eco-labels to market and verify their commitment towards conservation of the broader environment. Unfortunately, not all that glitters is gold and the substance supporting some 'eco-labels' is based on misleading claims or shallow measures of sustainability. Fortunately, there are also many responsible organisations which reliably promote and facilitate sustainability certification and the onus is on consumers to separate the heroes from the con-artists. Labels such as ENERGY STAR® and FSC (Forest Stewardship Council®) which certify appliance efficiency[1] and forestry sustainability[2], respectively, are responsible, trustworthy and meaningful signets.

'Greenwashing' is the term given to misappropriated advertising which promotes an environmentally sustainable state when this is in fact far from the truth. This has become an unfortunate trend whereby organisations sometimes create a smokescreen through the advertising of their 'green' products when in truth they are investing less towards sustainable measures than in the actual advertising itself. Furthermore, sustainability encompasses far more than environment integrity: it includes social impacts, both internally amongst employees and externally in the broader community. Social sustainability is often neglected in favour of the more tangible measures of the environment and profit[3].

A well-construed sustainability certification journey has numerous benefits. Apart from directed consumer marketing and satisfaction, the process towards green certification improves a company's bottom-line by increasing energy and water efficiency, thus reducing operational costs, and minimising waste generation. Indirect benefits include employee well-being in terms of job-satisfaction, non-absenteeism, productivity and morale. Ultimately, though, sustainability in the most holistic sense addresses and improves the triple bottom-line of uplifting people, increasing profit and enriching the planet within a responsible business[4].

The question now remains: how do consumers know which certification 'eco-label' to trust or support? Generally, there are three key aspects defining a trustworthy and effective sustainability certifier[5]:

1. Credible.
2. Independent.
3. Market-value.

Firstly, sustainability certifications need to be of a high-quality, based on accurate measurements which challenge and exceed industry norms and regulations. These measurements should (at least) include the core aspects of social and environmental sustainability. As such, these certifications

should premise and expand their auditing and review criteria on codes of good-practice such as those of the International Organisation of Standards (ISO) and other recognised criteria. Furthermore, the measurement criteria of sustainability certifications must be formally based on stakeholder review by relevant, qualified experts within the sustainability field.

Secondly, a credible certification should employ an independent auditing protocol which ensures that all organisations being measured are fully-compliant with the requirements of the certification. Independence and impartiality is thus a key requirement for reducing greenwashing in that it ensures that companies who claim to be 'green' and 'sustainable' are fully third-party verified in these statements.

Lastly, credible certifications are those which have market-value in that they are associated with recognised and established organisations. Generally, certifications which are implemented by non-profit organisations are of a higher value because the very not-for-profit nature of the implementing organisations ensures that they (usually) act for the benefit of sustainability rather than profit.

Importantly, certification is not the end-goal but is rather a means towards sustainability[6]. Businesses should endeavour towards certification as a tool and framework for implementing environmentally and socially sustainable operating procedures into their current business model. While it is true that there are real benefits in terms of stakeholder perception after certification, the true winners of this process are operational savings, employee satisfaction, environmental integrity and community development.

Example: Green Leaf™ Eco Standard

The Green Leaf™ Eco Standard (GLES) began in 2007 as a joint initiative amongst UK tour operators, Andrew Phillips and the non-profit organisation, the Wilderness Foundation, a 50-year legacy of leadership in conservation and environmental sustainability built upon the principles of its founder, Dr. Ian Player. The GLES began with a vision to challenge accountability within the tourism industry of South Africa by providing a unique, meaningful, certified mark to tourism buildings and organisations which complied with a technically-measured and independently-verified set of sustainability criteria. These criteria include energy, water and waste management, social responsibility, biodiversity, employee well-being, carbon mitigation, procurement, corporate governance, employment equity, and several others.

The GLES represents a credible, independent and meaningful certification mark, efficiently demonstrated though the numerous organisations which have achieved GLES certification based on their verified sustainability accomplishments, accompanied by a realised market-advantage and subsequent increase in their financial bottom-line. The GLES effectively adheres to the three aforementioned criteria of a 'green' eco-label in that it is (1) technically-directed through international standards of best-practice, (2) independently implemented by global verification agencies (GVAs) which are required to continuously adhere to a strict set of competencies, and (3) associated with a strong and recognisable market-value appeal through its roots in the Wilderness Foundation.

Currently, the GLES has expanded on its successful incorporation into the tourism and hospitality industry to other industry sectors including, retail, business services and manufacturing. As indicated above, the GLES is implemented by GVAs which are accredited facilities qualified to certify any Green Leaf™ Eco Standard compliant international organisation or facility. Green Leaf Sustainability Services (GLSS) is one such GVA and, as per GLES implementer requirements, has a team of qualified environmental and quality specialists who consult, implement and audit according to the GLES requirements.

Conclusion

In a world which is increasingly conscious of the sustainability issues associated with products and services, eco-labelling from credible organisations is a powerful and proven marketing tool which demonstrates commitment to sustainability without the threat of greenwashing. Furthermore, the journey towards certification is beneficial towards improving employee satisfaction and in highlighting inefficient areas which a company can improve on to bolster its sustainability and financial performance. In today's era, organisations can ill-afford to disregard sustainability in the appeal of their products – the verified stamp of a suitable eco-label, as outlined in this article, should be a priority

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This article was prepared by GLSS, a Global Verification Agency of the Green Leaf™ Eco Standard. More information on GLES can be obtained directly from GLSS at:

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