



# Recent prominent "greenwashing" case studies

ESG & Sustainability Transformation

Hung NINH

2/2025

ESG Transformation



## Recent prominent "greenwashing" case studies

1. **Innocent:** insincere TV adverts
2. **Keurig:** misleading recycling claims
3. **Ikea:** accredited illegal logging
4. **Windex:** misleading plastic packing claims
5. **H&M:** insincere sustainable fashion claims
6. **Hefty:** false representation of the product
7. **Ryanair:** false low-emissions claims
8. **Luton airport:** airport expansion deception
9. **Quorn:** unverifiable carbon-footprint claims
10. **Shell:** gaslighting of the general public
11. **Unilever:** unclear environmental claims
12. **HSBC:** misleading climate ads
13. **Lloyds:** misleading LinkedIn ads
14. **Delta:** false carbon-neutrality claims
15. **Active Super:** misrepresented investment strategy
16. **Anglian Water:** concealing pollution
17. **Danish Crown:** misleading climate claim
18. **TotalEnergies:** deceptive social media competition

Are you excited to take a closer look at each of these "greenwashing" situations?

### 1. Innocent

Year: 2022

Who called it out: Plastic Rebellion

Type of greenwashing: insincere TV adverts

Where: UK

When greenwashing, companies project an eco-friendly image which is untrue. Sometimes the disguise is hard to detect but in other cases the veneer strays so far from the truth that you begin to question the sobriety of the PR & Marketing teams behind the greenwash. Did they really think that would work?

Innocent Drinks is a prime example of the implausible approach. The company is owned by Coca Cola, the worst plastic polluter in the world. The company also uses single-use plastic – which is terrible for the environment. Yet, someone, somewhere, thought it'd be a convincing idea to release twee TV cartoon adverts – featuring cute animals singing songs about recycling and fixing the planet. In an effort to connect the brand with these contradictory causes.



It's greenwashing, pure and simple. It'd be funny if it weren't for the dire consequences of all that plastic pollution.

Luckily, the ASA stepped in and banned the ludicrous ads after they were reported by Plastic Rebellion.

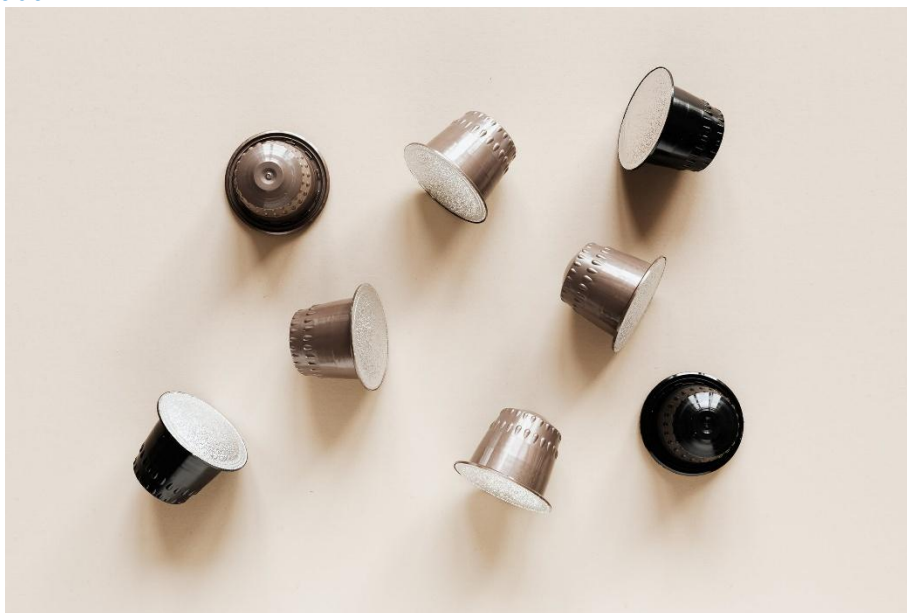
## 2. Keurig

Year: 2022

Who called it out: The Competition Bureau

Type of greenwashing: misleading recycling claims

Where: Canada



Coffee Capsules - Greenwashing Examples

The global coffee capsule market is worth over \$10 billion and growing fast. But the mountain of discarded capsules remains difficult to recycle. The problem is you have to use specialist recycling services instead of local recycling bins.

As a case in point of how the recycling process can go badly wrong. Keurig led Canadian buyers to believe they could recycle their single-use plastic coffee pods by simply breaking open the top, emptying out the coffee, and throwing the empty carcass into recycling bins. Easy right?

Wrong. The capsules weren't accepted in most Canadian provinces, except for Quebec and British Columbia. And even then the instructions didn't go far enough. The City of Toronto had to revert 90 tonnes of plastic pods from recycling bins last year because of this kind of capsule carnage.

Keurig were fined \$3 million and ordered to change the misleading recycling claims on the packaging.

Pro tip: at Akepa we find a coffee from our attentive local baristas is way, way better than a mediocre coffee from a pod!

## 3. IKEA

Year: 2020



Who called it out: Earthsight  
Type of greenwashing: accredited illegal logging  
Where: EU (Sweden) /Ukraine

IKEA is the largest consumer of wood in the world, and its timber consumption has doubled in the last decade. An investigation by Earthsight found that IKEA has been making beechwood chairs using illegally sourced wood from the forests of Ukraine's Carpathian region, an area home to endangered beasts such as bears, lynxes, wolves, and bison.

Perhaps the most shocking thing about this case is that the illegal timber was certified by the Forest Stewardship Council. This oversight raises serious questions about the ethics and transparency of the FSC accreditation, which according to Earthsight, is not limited to Ukraine. They describe "rampant illegal logging" across the globe under the watchful eye of the FSC.

In spite of this, IKEA is among the best in the world in terms of its sustainability credentials, and FSC is considered the gold standard of forest accreditation.

#### **4. Windex**

Year: 2019-20  
Who called it out: Packaging 360, Owen Rosenberg  
Type of greenwashing: misleading plastic packaging claims  
Where: USA

The glass cleaner by SC Johnson claimed its bottles were made from 100% "ocean plastic". But before you start imagining intrepid teams of Windex employees out on boats wresting plastic from the sea, let me stop you right there — because that's not what happened.

In fact, the plastic used to make the bottles was never in the ocean. It was pulled from plastic banks in Indonesia, the Philippines, and Haiti. This type of plastic is known as ocean-bound plastic because it would have otherwise ended up in the ocean.

But the problematic marketing doesn't end there. Windex also claims to be non-toxic, but a lawsuit was filed against SC Johnson in 2020, claiming that Windex products contain ingredients that are harmful to people, animals, and the environment.

#### **5. H&M & Fast Fashion**

Year: 2021  
Who called it out: Changing Markets Foundation  
Type of greenwashing: insincere sustainable fashion claims  
Where: EU





The fast fashion industry is notorious for its environmental impact, so a level of greenwashing is to be expected there. But you might be surprised at the sheer amount of greenwash that was revealed in a 2021 report from the Changing Markets Foundation.

They looked at clothing from major high-street fashion brands to check the truthfulness of their sustainability claims and found 60% of claims overall were misleading. That's bad but H&M were found to be the worst offenders with a shocking 96% of their claims not holding up.

Put simply, virtually all of the Scandinavian Fashion Giant's claims were designed to trick people concerned about their environmental impact into buying.

So, the next time you consider buying from a major retailer like H&M because of imprecise green-tinged language like 'conscious', reconsider. The percentages say we're likely being lied to.

## 6. Hefty Recycling Bags

Year: 2021

Who called it out: Lisabeth Hanscom

Type of greenwashing: false representation of the product

Where: USA

In May 2021, a class-action lawsuit was filed against Hefty Recycling Bags for the claim that its bags are "designed to handle all types of recyclables". According to the lawsuit, not only are Hefty bags not recyclable but they also contaminate waste that would otherwise have been recyclable. This means many items held within Hefty's bags, that could have been recycled, end up in landfills instead.

Hefty bags are therefore no different from ordinary bin bags (and possibly even worse), and the lawsuit claims their misleading branding violates California's anti-greenwashing laws.

## 7. Ryanair

Year: 2020

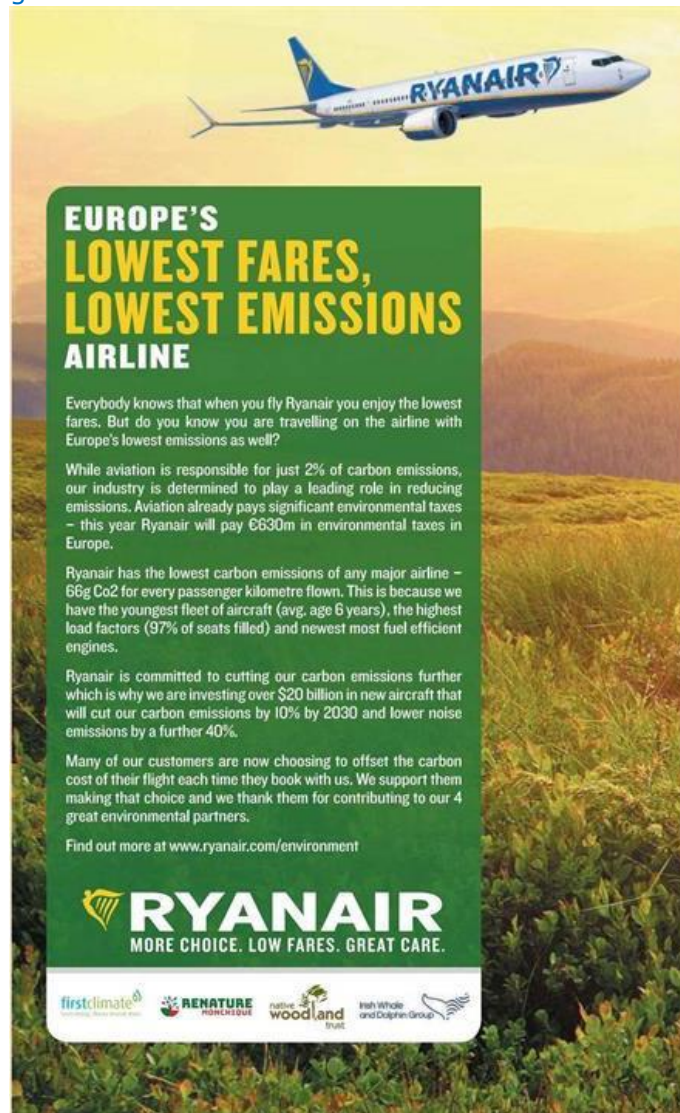
Who called it out: Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)

Type of greenwashing: false low-emissions claims



Where: UK

Mid-flight ads, misleading luggage charges, uncomfortable seats. These are just a few of the reasons why people dislike flying Ryanair – and now you can add another complaint to the list: greenwashing.



In early 2020, Ryanair audaciously announced itself to the British public as Europe’s “lowest emissions airline”. The claim was more or less made up and the Advertising Standards Authority promptly banned the ads.

It’s a reminder that in environmentally sensitive sectors like aviation, you need to be extra careful as brands are all too eager to promote their green credentials to win more customers. Often the claims made just aren’t true.

### 8. Luton Airport

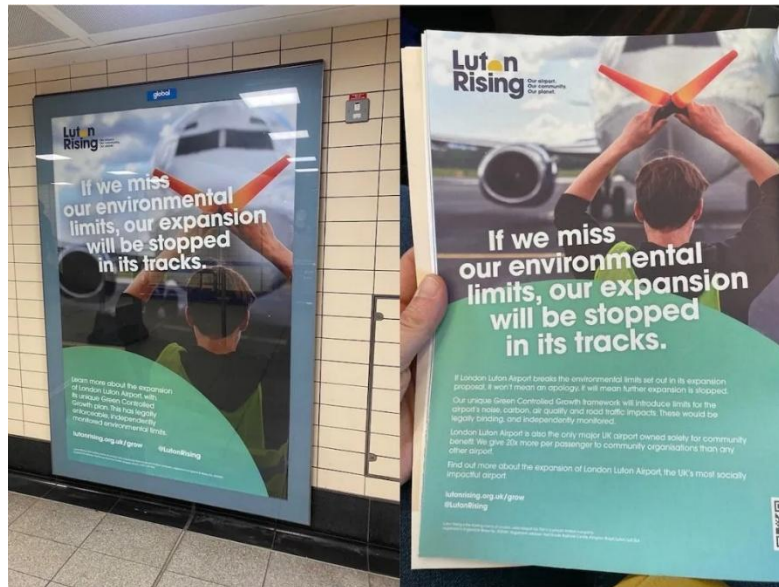
Year: 2024

Who called it out: Adfree Cities, Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)

Type of greenwashing: airport expansion deception

Where: UK





“If we miss our environmental limits, our expansion will be stopped in its tracks”. That’s the straightforward yet incisive message that London’s Luton Airport ran in a series of billboard and magazine ads.

Sadly, as you may have guessed with our being on the topic of greenwashing, the message wasn’t to be trusted. The main reason being that the airport failed to include emissions from flights in its environmental accounting. That’s a colossal oversight when you consider an airport expansion would lead to far more flights, those flights would be a major source of emissions, and there would be environmental limits not to cross.

The complaint was first filed by members of campaign group Adfree Cities. The ASA upheld the complaint and banned the ads in June 2024.

Speaking about the case, Adfree Cities co-director Veronica Wignall said “This level of deception is totally shocking – it’s like advertising cigarettes as healthy.”

## 9. Quorn Foods Thai Wonder Grains

Year: 2020

Who called it out: Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)

Type of greenwashing: misleading and unverifiable carbon footprint claims

Where: UK

Quorn Foods advertised their new product, the Thai Wonder Grains lunch pot, as a way to address climate change. The advert claimed it “helps us reduce our carbon footprint”, but what wasn’t clear was who exactly they meant by “us”.

It turns out they were referring to Quorn Foods, and not ordinary folk, who should avoid buying products that come in single-use plastic if they want to reduce their carbon footprint.

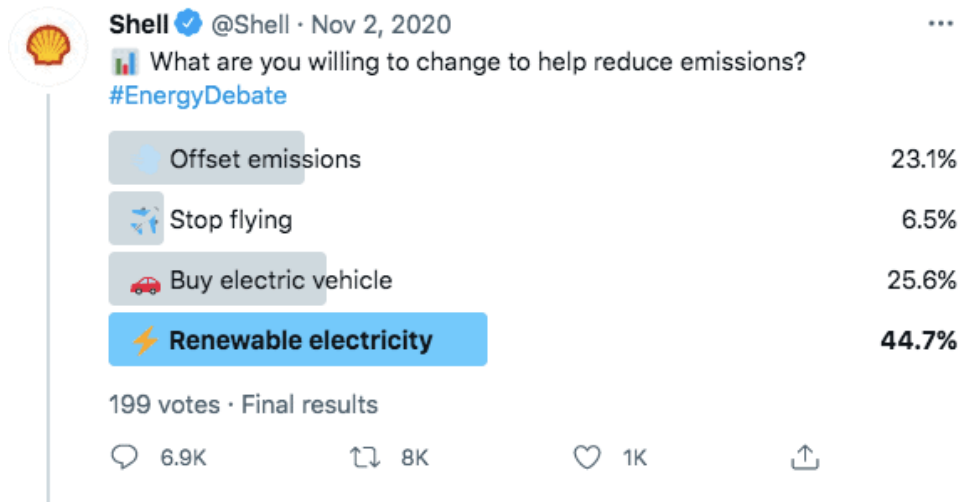
An inquiry by the Advertising Standards Authority ruled that the ad was misleading. It also noted that since the product in question was new, it was impossible to determine whether it could reduce Quorn’s carbon footprint.

## 10. Shell



Year: 2020  
 Who called it out: The Internet  
 Type of greenwashing: gaslighting of the general public  
 Where: Worldwide

Shell’s got some balls. The company is responsible for around 2% of global CO2 emissions from its activities every year, while it continues to plough ahead and invest billions in oil and gas. And yet, despite this, their marketing team thought it appropriate to ask their followers on Twitter what they were “willing to change to help reduce emissions”? Really?



Greenwashing examples - Shell Poll-min

The poll attracted a modest 199 responses but still went viral due to the wave of vitriol it received in response, including high-profile rejoinders from the likes of Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez and Greta Thunberg.

This truly was one of greenwashing’s most egregious examples. But only a few months later, some karma was served when a European court ordered Shell to reduce its carbon emissions by 45% by 2030 compared to 2019 levels. It’s the first time that a private company has been ordered to reduce its emissions by a fixed amount with a defined time frame (sadly, The Court of Appeal in The Hague overturned this ruling in November 2024).

If that wasn’t enough, here’s another case that took a whole year before reaching its end. Are we surprised that Shell has engaged in greenwashing more than once? No.

Year: 2023  
 Who called it out: Adfree Cities  
 Type of greenwashing: misleading ads about clean energy business  
 Where: UK

In June 2022, the gas and oil giant launched a marketing campaign – featuring billboard posters, a YouTube ad, and a TV commercial – to promote their clean energy business in Bristol and the wider UK. The advertisements included misleading claims about Shell’s involvement in providing clean energy and e-vehicle charging stations. In the physical billboards, they dared to say, “In the South West 78,000 homes use 100% renewable electricity from Shell Energy.” In reality, it was coming from the country’s National Grid – a fact that was mentioned, albeit in a conveniently smaller font.



Campaign group Adfree Cities filed a complaint to the ASA, arguing the commercials failed to give any context on Shell's total environmental impact. It's true that the company does engage in clean energy but their overall business resulted in CO2 emissions of 1.2 billion tonnes last year alone. Meanwhile, spending on gas and oil production is still expected to increase. Somehow, their net-zero target is set for 2050. So the overall background isn't all that green, is it?

The campaign was finally banned a year after its launch but doubts linger. Stricter regulation is needed to stop false messaging where fossil fuels are implicated.

What's next, Shell?

## 11. Unilever

Year: 2022

Who called it out: Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)

Type of greenwashing: unclear environmental claims

Where: UK

Unilever's cleaning brand Persil is one of the UK's most popular, with its washing-up liquid and dishwasher tablets used by millions of people each year. Many of those buyers are becoming concerned about the environment, so it's not surprising that Unilever has upped its efforts to appear eco-friendly. Nevertheless, Persil's 'Dirt is Good' TV ads have been banned by the Advertising Standards Authority for unsubstantiated claims to be 'kinder on the planet'.

It's the kind of perfunctory statement that's not unusual from greenwashers, although in this case adorned by flimsy supporting scenes, such as a woman hashtagging #plantmoretrees on social media – and kids collecting plastic garbage from rivers and beaches. None of which explained why Persil was kinder on the planet.

The ASA took umbrage with the 'various strands' for being 'unclear'. Kinder on the planet than what exactly? Meteorites, maybe. But all considered it's fair to conclude that Persil, a typical laundry detergent, can't be all that kind on the planet.

What to learn from this? It's a case that shows if you are going to make environmental claims these days then they need to be backed up. Someone tapping out an appropriate hashtag won't do at all.

## 12. HSBC

Year: 2022

Who called it out: Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)

Type of greenwashing: misleading climate ads

Where: UK

According to lots of credible sources, the world's biggest banks are funding the climate crisis, mainly through investments with a significant impact on greenhouse gas emissions – especially fossil fuels.

HSBC ranks 13th of the top banks financing fossil fuels in the UK. And still finances carbon-heavy industries like thermal coal mining. Yet, a bit of progress in greenwashing awareness was made when 45 people complained to the Advertising Standards Authority that HSBC's advertisements were misleading. The offending ads were then banned but you can still see them in the image below.





One of HSBC's climate ads

HSBC argued that they're financing many of these industries to help them eventually transition to net zero, and it would be impractical to terminate funding. But while they highlighted their climate-friendly initiatives in their adverts, they failed to mention their considerable contribution to the climate crisis at the same time – an estimated \$8.7 billion into new oil and gas in 2021.

It's an environmental nuance that was absent in the ads – and that, our friends, is greenwashing.

An irony of all this is that the day before the adverts were banned, HSBC were running workshops on how to spot and deal with greenwashing. They might need to take their own advice...

### 13. Lloyds Banking Group

Year: 2024

Who called it out: Adfree Cities

Type of greenwashing: misleading LinkedIn ads

Where: UK

Now straight to a more contemporary banking case from 2024 which involved more or less the same story as the previous. The distinction being that instead of HSBC's physical ads in places like bus stops, Lloyds Banking Group ran a series of misleading social media ads on LinkedIn.

The ad gave off inappropriate vibes around the group's eco credentials. You can behold the banned promotion below, where you'll find plenty about what the company is doing but nothing about the contradictory incursions. For instance, the group may be putting 'the weight' of their finance into clean and renewable energy but that's failing to mention the oodles of finance towards fossil fuels. In fact, \$1.9billion in 2023 – according to Adfree Cities, who called-out the ad to the ASA.



The image shows a screenshot of a Lloyds Banking Group advertisement. The ad features a dark blue header with the Lloyds logo and the text 'Lloyds Banking Group Promoted'. Below this, it asks 'What are we doing to help accelerate the transition to a low carbon economy?' and provides three bullet points: 'We're committed to supporting the energy transition, by continuing to reduce our reliance on fossil fuels and putting the weight of our finance into clean and renewable energy.', 'We use 100% renewable energy to power our buildings', 'We're aiming to halve our own energy consumption by 2030.', and 'We're also helping people and businesses across the UK understand how they can be more sustainable.'. The main visual is a stylized illustration of a power pylon in a green field under a blue sky with a moon and clouds. A play button icon is overlaid on the pylon. At the bottom, it says 'Find out more about our net zero ambitions' and has a 'Learn more' button. To the right of the ad, four callouts with green warning icons and the word 'Greenwash' point to specific elements: 1. 'Lloyds Bank undermines the transition to a low carbon economy through continuing to finance fossil fuels.' (points to the first bullet point). 2. 'Blurs operational use of fossil fuels (like power to Lloyds' buildings) with financing activities.' (points to the second bullet point). 3. 'Fails to mention Lloyds' financing of carbon intensive industries. Lloyds Bank's financed emissions were 32.8 million tonnes of CO2e in 2022.' (points to the third bullet point). 4. 'Green imagery gives a misleadingly positive impression of climate action' (points to the power pylon illustration).

Lloyds Banking group greenwashing ad

Interestingly, the ad was crafted alongside a traditional marketing agency, adam&eveDDB, who seem to have got their client in hot water with insufficient knowledge of the pitfalls of greenwashing. It's a reminder that a sustainability marketing agency like Akepa is the way to go for authentic sustainability ad campaigns.

#### 14. Delta Airlines

Year: 2023

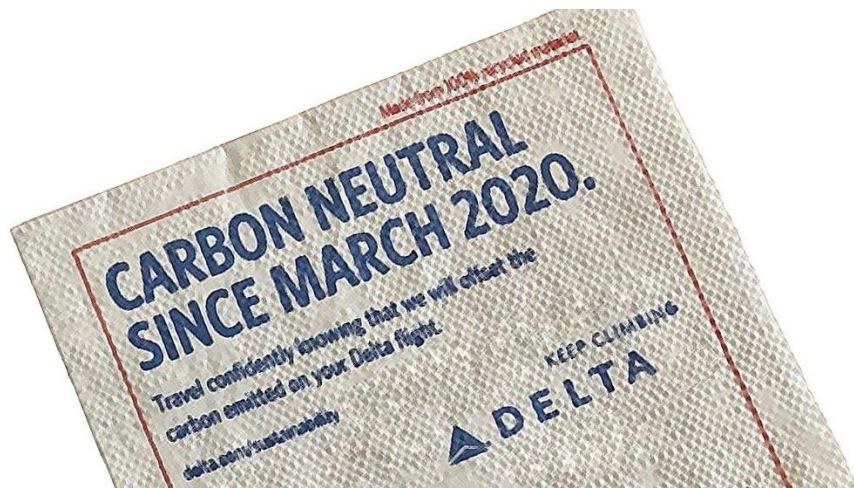
Who called it out: consumer class action lawsuit

Type of greenwashing: false carbon-neutrality claims

Where: USA

It's not a sin to enjoy travelling, to want to discover new places and visit worldly wonders. But let's be honest, it's extremely difficult, if not impossible, to make a trip carbon-neutral when flights are involved. Airplanes burning fossil fuels are one of the most prolific contributors to CO2 emissions. So while engineers and scientists search for alternative solutions, it's a reality we should think twice about.

Which begs the question: exactly how delusional was Delta Air Lines when they thought it was okay to send this message in consumer-facing advertising?



"Travel confidently knowing that we will offset the carbon emitted in your Delta flight." on a napkin. Source: Live and Lets Fly

Back in 2020, Delta pledged \$1 billion – for a plan including carbon offset credits and supposed reduced use of jet fuel – to cut the emissions created by its business. It's generous, sure.

But now, California's residents are trying to sue the company over their cocky statement, "the world's first carbon-neutral airline".

The case is proof of the power of marketing, showing how deceptive such a claim can be. Even when facts aren't there to back it up. But more than that, it speaks to the long overdue need for greenwashing regulation.

## 15. Active Super

Year: 2023-2024

Who called it out: Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC)

Type of greenwashing: misrepresentation of ESG-related investments

Where: Australia

What does it say when financial institutions are largely responsible for the obscene jump in greenwashing scandals this year? When money (and profit) is on the table, the truth always seems to be a bit more open to interpretation.

Active Super, one of Australia's biggest superannuation funds, has been linked to sustainability and responsible investments for years. It was even named Money Magazine's ESG Super Fund Leader for 2022. This sparkling reputation had to be investigated after Australia's Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) sued them for greenwashing.





Active Super found guilty for greenwashing | Worst greenwashing brands 2024  
Active Super's sustainability claims have been called out for what they are (Source: Principals)

Active Super said they would stop investments that were harmful to the environment and community, including tobacco manufacturing, oil tar sands, and gambling. Russia, because of the invasion of Ukraine, was also supposed to be off-limits. Yet ASIC found evidence that says otherwise: holdings in the very type of businesses that aren't people- or planet-friendly. And in Russian securities, too.

In June 2024, Active Super was found guilty by Australia's Federal Court. At the time of making the claims, Active Super was holding stakes in a tobacco company, Russian oil and gas firms, and a coal mining company, among others.

## 16. Anglian Water

Year: 2023

Who called it out: Advertising Standards Authority (ASA)

Type of greenwashing: concealing pollution record

Where: UK

In 2022, 10 UK water companies, including Anglian Water, repeatedly discharged sewage into rivers and seas – totalling an average of 824 filthy spills a day.

So it was cheeky of Anglian Water to then release a TV ad campaign, claiming "everything we do today is for tomorrow" and how the company cleans water by creating wildlife-friendly wetlands. Of this 'everything', their hefty sewage spills, which were certainly something, somehow got overlooked.



Anglian Water greenwashing ASA | Worst greenwashing brands 2024

Anglian Water was fined £2.65 million after sewage overflowed into the North Sea. And for that glaring omission, the ASA banned the ad. They did say that Anglian Water were carrying out activities that could have a positive impact on the environment. But they felt that Anglian Water's message was contradictory, because the company also had a history of activities that were harmful to the environment (including fines) – and chose to omit this information.

Take it from us as a sustainable marketing agency: this is why it's important that when you err environmentally, to admit your faults while moving forward. Don't just shove it under the rug and hope nobody notices. Because they will. It can then taint the genuine action that you're taking.

### **17. Danish Crown**

Year: 2021-2024

Who called it out: Vegetarian Society of Denmark and The Climate Movement

Type of greenwashing: misleading climate claim

Where: Denmark

In Denmark's first lawsuit tackling greenwashing, Europe's largest pork producer, Danish Crown, was taken to court and found guilty. In a victory for climate and animal welfare advocates, the Western High Court in Viborg asserted that Danish Crown misled its customers in its 'Climate-Controlled Pork' campaign, where it stated that "Our pigs are more climate-friendly than you think".

Climate-controlled pork greenwashing campaign Danish Crown | Worst greenwashing brands 2024





“25% less climate footprint since 2005” claimed Danish Crown

Although the court found that the phrase “more climate-friendly than you think” wasn’t a blatant violation, it ruled that the pink stickers claiming the pigs were “climate-controlled” violated Denmark’s marketing act as the label wasn’t subject to independent control. Danish Crown stopped using the label in 2021. But it wasn’t until 2024, following the court ruling, that the pork producer conceded it had greenwashed.

## 18. TotalEnergies

Year: 2024

Who called it out: Fossil Free South Africa & South Africa Advertising Regulatory Board

Type of greenwashing: deceptive social media competition

Where: South Africa

In a historic first for South Africa, TotalEnergies – the world’s 19th biggest fossil fuel emitter – was found guilty of misleading advertising.

Greenwashing ads come in many mysterious forms and in this case, the deception emerged as a hashtag competition on social media. In the competition, TotalEnergies teamed up with South Africa National Parks (who really should have known better) to encourage park visitors to upload photos of themselves in the epic landscapes with the hashtag #FuelYourExperience – also tagging TotalEnergies and SANParks. The winners would receive a gift voucher and a weekend getaway.





TotalEnergies South Africa National Parks greenwashing example

Within the campaign, TotalEnergies insisted it was “committed to sustainable development and environmental protection”.

Yet, the evidence suggests more destruction than protection. Not only has the company increased its emissions but it also has a 62% stake in the Africa Crude Oil pipeline project, which will be the longest electrically heated crude oil pipeline in the world and could wreck environmental carnage along its path.

It’s a reminder that greenwashing ‘advertising’ doesn’t just mean straightforward print, TV or billboard ads. Other types of promotional campaigns like social media competitions count, too.

The decision follows South Africa passing its first ever Climate Act in July. TotalEnergies has appealed the ruling.

With a bit of luck, greenwashing’s days will be numbered – especially with stricter new laws from the EU and other regions. People are getting tired of the same old corporate tricks and want to support brands that are truly sustainable.

To learn more about ESG and sustainability-related models, please contact [\*\*YTT Consulting!\*\*](mailto:info@ytt-consulting.com)