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Barbara M. Miller  
*Elon University, bmiller9@elon.edu*

Janas Sinclair  
*University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, sinclair@unc.edu*

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The Ethics and Boundaries of Industry Environmental Campaigns

BARBARA M. MILLER & JANAS SINCLAIR

School of Communications
Elon University
Elon, NC
USA
bmiller9@elon.edu

School of Journalism and Mass Communication
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Chapel Hill, NC
USA
sinclair@unc.edu

ABSTRACT: As scientific consensus points to an environmental crisis, many industry campaigns downplay the industry’s environmental impacts while publicizing adverse effects to the economy that may result from environmental regulations. This project identifies boundaries of responsible industry environmental in terms of the ethical criteria of visibility, veracity, and sensitivity.

KEYWORDS: corporate communication, corporate social responsibility, environmental communication, ethics, industry environmental campaigns, marketplace advocacy

1. INTRODUCTION

Current scientific consensus indicates the planet is experiencing the effects of climate change and that these changes signal the beginning of an impending environmental crisis. The White House’s Third National Climate Assessment (May, 2014) and the United Nation’s Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report (April, 2014) call for dramatic changes in energy usage to achieve significant reduction in carbon emissions. Yet despite these and other calls for action in response to climate change, many industry campaigns use tactics such as corporate reports, web sites, advertising, and public relations to argue for the status quo in energy policies. Lobbying and public relations efforts in particular are often used to downplay industry’s environmental impact while publicizing adverse effects to the economy that may result from environmental restrictions. At the same time, oil and other energy industry media campaigns frequently tout the positive message that corporate initiatives can provide the solution to environmental problems. And while some businesses are genuinely committed to pro-social and environmental causes, critics have labeled such campaigns as “greenwashing” when claims of sustainability or positive environmental impact are exaggerated or unwarranted (Dahl, 2010; Lauffer, 2003). As a group, many corporate environmental campaigns have been described as seeking to “assuage the concerns of the public, deflect blame away from polluting corporations, and promote voluntary measures over bona fide regulation” (Kenny Bruno, quoted by Dahl, 2010).

This article first seeks to define corporate environmental campaigns based on corporate marketing and public relations literature. The nature, scope and purpose of these campaigns are then used as a basis for identifying the boundaries of appropriate advocacy and responsible
promotion for industry environmental campaigns. While some campaigns target specialized audiences, such as legislators and government officials, our focus is on advertising campaigns, which are used by oil and other energy companies to reach the general population, and given corporate financial resources, often comprise a significant share of voice in the arena of environmental messages. Literature on ethical corporate marketing, ethical advertising, and ethical public relations is used to define responsible industry advocacy. Previous scholarship has provided general frameworks for ethics in these fields; this article will focus on three key issues of particular concern for industry environmental advocacy. These are (1) transparency of the message source, (2) accuracy in describing industry activities, and (3) responsible use of values appeals. While industry campaigns may typically fall short in the areas of transparency and accuracy, they clearly focus on values, and new empirical findings for public response to these appeals will be presented as a basis for ethical considerations. Data from a U.S. national Web-based survey examining public response to advertising from the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity indicates values appeals may negatively affect society by leading people to set aside their environmental concerns with the assumptions that environmental problems are adequately being addressed by industry.

2. EXPLICATING INDUSTRY ENVIRONMENTAL CAMPAIGNS

The academic literature has not clearly defined industry environmental campaigns as a type of corporate communication. While many trade associations (e.g., the American Chemistry Council, the American Forest and Paper Association, the American Petroleum Institute, etc.) and their communication consultants commonly use terms such as “advocacy” and even “public education” to describe their efforts to confront barriers to the industry and impact policy and public opinion, critics widely recognize industry environmental campaigns as “greenwashing.” Many of these efforts have been discussed generally as an example of corporate social responsibility without discussion of potentially distinguishing characteristics, and frequently these campaigns are not clearly differentiated from messages that brand a particular product or service based on environmental claims. We argue that industry environmental campaigns have unique properties, and explication of this construct is important for developing ethical guidelines for their development and implementation.

2.1 Corporate Marketing Communication

At the broadest level, industry environmental campaigns can be classified as an example of corporate marketing. Corporate marketing can be distinguished from the more traditional marketing approach, which focuses on fulfilling customer needs through product and service offerings. Corporate marketing, in contrast, has a broader focus on stakeholders, which includes customers as well as other key groups, and their ongoing relationship with the organization, as opposed to a particular product or service offering (Balmer, Powell, & Greyser, 2011). Communication is one element of the marketing mix—with messages designed to communicate product or service benefits to target consumers exemplifying traditional marketing communication, and messages designed to communicate about the organization to stakeholders representing corporate marketing communications.

2.2 CSR Corporate Communication
It has been argued that corporate social responsibility (CSR) is a morally implicit feature of corporate marketing, with its focus on the relationships among stakeholders and the entire organization demanding consideration of societal and ethical concerns (Balmer, 2001; Balmer, Power, & Greyser, 2011). More specifically, CSR refers to the obligation of a business to respond to the needs of the society on which it depends (Ellen, Webb, & Mohr, 2006; Buchholtz & Carroll, 2008; Carroll, 1991; Waller & Connaway, 2011; L’Etang, 1996). At the same time, CSR does not preclude self-interest and is recognized as serving organizational goals as well as the broader interests of society. Bhattachara and Sen (2004), for example, define CSR initiatives as attempts to achieve commercial success in ways that honor ethical values and respect people, communities, and the natural environment. Messages controlled and distributed by the company about its CSR efforts, or CSR communication, include corporate reports, web sites, advertising, and public relations (Parguel, Beniot-Moreau, Larceneux, & 2011). While some CSR messages serve traditional, as opposed to corporate, marketing goals by differentiating a product or service based on an environmental or other social quality (Van de Ven, 2008; Dahl, 2010), other messages seek to build a virtuous corporate brand through the communication of CSR endeavors, or CSR corporate communication (Van de Ven, 2008; Parguel, Beniot-Moreau, & Larceneux, 2011). CSR corporate communication represents a significant portion of all corporate communication; even more than a decade ago, CSR communication was found to be the third-largest budget item for corporate communication departments in large companies (Hutton, Goodman, Alexander, & Genest, 2001).

Under the broader umbrella of CSR, businesses’ responsibility to manage the impact of their products and operations on the natural environment has been specifically defined as corporate environmental responsibility (CER) (Matejk & Gossling, 2014). CER communication, thus, is the development and distribution of messages by the company about its CER efforts, and there is indication that CER communication is growing. In France in 2008, for example, 6% of mass media advertisements included messages about company actions to protect the environment, a sixfold increase since 2006 (ARPP, 2009). Meanwhile, in the U.S., ads in major consumer magazines that made some type of environmental claim increased from 3.5% of all ads in 2006 to over 10% in 2009 (TerraChoice, 2009).

### 2.3 Are Industry Environmental Campaigns CSR Communication?

Academic studies examining corporate environmental campaigns, or campaigns described as “greenwashing,” frequently label these messages as CSR communication. We argue, in contrast, that most of these campaigns are a distinct form of corporate communication best described as marketplace advocacy. Industry environmental campaigns are similar to CSR communication to the extent that (1) both are intended to portray a company as responsive to the needs of society, and (2) both also serve the needs of the company. On the other hand, there is also a key difference; while the essence of CSR is “doing well by doing good,” the essence of most industry environmental campaigns is protecting the organization’s position in the marketplace. CSR involves corporations’ “voluntary consideration of stakeholder concerns both within and outside its business operations” (Homburg, Stier, & Bornemann, 2013, p. 54), so CSR campaigns address pro-social initiatives in a range of areas. For example, CSR communication includes Target Corporations’ “It Comes from the Heart” ad about Target employees volunteering to distribute food to fight childhood hunger and Yoplait Yogurt’s “Save Lids to Save Lives” campaign about their initiative to raise money for the Susan G.
Komen organization for breast cancer. Both of these campaigns communicate a positive brand image through activities designed to serve the broader community. In contrast, industry environmental campaigns focus squarely on the company’s own current or future products or production processes. ExxonMobil’s “Algae” ad, for example, focuses on their algae biofuel research and its potential to reduce greenhouse emissions. While this ad may portray ExxonMobil as responsive to society’s needs, it does so to protect the company’s position in the marketplace by assuaging current or potential stakeholder concerns about its environmental impact.

2.4 Marketplace Advocacy: A Type of Corporate Issue Advocacy

While it is theoretically possible for industry environmental campaigns to accomplish the aims of CSR, most of these messages can be more accurately described as a distinct form of corporate communication, marketplace advocacy. The public relations literature on issues management provides insight into communications that serve an advocacy function. In public relations, issues management has been broadly defined as involving two primary functions: (1) government affairs, or efforts to enhance or protect business’ interests regarding issues that will be decided within the judicial process; and (2) strategic communication, or organizational efforts to coordinate all messages to emphasize a business’ position regarding public policy issues (Toth, 1986). Issue advocacy campaigns, a strategy reflective of the second function of issues management, utilize both public relations and advertising techniques; in fact, advertising in this context is sometimes referred to as “public relations advertising.” Issue advocacy campaigns are typically initiated to influence public opinion, policy debates, and/or legislative outcomes by communicating an organization’s stance on an issue or policy (Cutler & Muehling, 1989; Heath & Nelson, 1986; Nelson, 1994).

Issue advocacy can be broadly classified into marketplace, political, and values advocacy (Arens, Weigold, & Arens, 2008). While political advocacy focuses on support for a public policy or candidate (e.g., Soontae, Jin, & Phau, 2006), values advocacy associates an organization with accepted societal values (e.g., Bostdorff & Vibert, 1994; Haley, 1996; Lee, Haley, & Yang, 2013). Meanwhile, marketplace advocacy encourages public acceptance for a product, service or industry sector (Arens et al., 2008) and most accurately describes the efforts of industry environmental campaigns to protect the position of their industry in the marketplace. More specifically, marketplace advocacy seeks to protect the sponsor’s market by promoting the role of a business in society and its contribution to the economic health and prosperity of the community, while indirectly reducing the potential for future government intervention in corporate activities resulting from public calls for investigations of, or protection from, industry (Cutler & Muehling, 1989). Industry environmental campaigns clearly represent this form of advocacy as most campaign messages foster the impression that voluntary corporate efforts make government regulation unnecessary (Sinclair & Miller, 2012).

In sum, industry environmental campaigns represent a distinct form of corporate communication, marketplace advocacy. These campaigns focus on the entire organization, rather than a particular product or service, and target stakeholders beyond customers, similar to other forms of corporate communication. Marketplace advocacy is distinct, however, in its focus on protecting the sponsor’s position in the marketplace. In this article we take the perspective that responsible advertising and public relations tactics are possible (Hyman, 2008; Edgett, 2009), but that extra vigilance is required to ensure responsible corporate
environmental campaigns. We argue this extra consideration is warranted because industry environmental campaigns serve a corporate marketing function. Meanwhile, corporate marketing, with its focus on mutually beneficial relationships with a broad range of stakeholders, has been described as requiring consideration of societal concerns, including honoring ethical values and respecting people, communities, and the natural environment (Balmer, 2001; Balmer, Power, & Greysen, 2011). In addition, industry environmental campaigns merit special attention because, while they may resemble CSR communication in portraying a company as responsive to the needs of society, they serve the distinct goal of marketplace advocacy. Arguably, the goal of advocating to protect the company’s position in the marketplace represents an even stronger focus on the organization’s interest than CSR communication warrants. As L’Etang (1996) states, “there is clearly something wrong about claiming moral capital while at the same time being driven largely by self-interest” (p. 91).

Explication of industry environmental campaigns indicates that these campaigns are a type of corporate communication, which scholars have argued necessitates consideration of ethics. On the other hand, as marketplace advocacy, these campaigns seek to build a virtuous brand image, but are largely driven by self-interest in promoting a public policy agenda. In the next section, boundaries for responsible industry environmental campaigns are presented. Our goal is not to present an exhaustive list of criterion for ethical advocacy, but to focus on criterion most relevant for this type of communication. Three key criteria are identified: (1) transparency of the message source, (2) accuracy in describing industry activities, and (3) responsible use of values appeals.

3. TRANSPARENCY OF THE MESSAGE SOURCE: VISIBILITY

Transparency has been identified as an ideal in the communications profession. Professional organizations in public relations and communication (including the Public Relations Society of America, the International Public Relations Association, the International Association of Business Communicators, and the American Marketing Association) underscore the truthful and full disclosure of information in three areas: client-organization, employee-employer, and community-organization, which is the issue at hand when corporate environmental campaigns are sponsored by an association instead of a single, recognized corporation. Academic literature has also identified transparency of the message source as a criterion for ethical public relations advocacy; Edgett calls this the criterion of visibility, or “clear identification of all communications on behalf of the client or organization as originating from that source” (2009, p. 19). If an organization fails to reveal its identity to gain an advantage, or orchestrates a campaign to present its views as coming from some other source, then it fails to act responsibly to audience members. The philosophical roots of this argument lie in the Kantian “practical imperative” to treat people as “ends” rather than as only a means to another’s goal. Failing to satisfy the requirement of visibility could even be considered harmful to democracy, because it implies a lack of fairness in public debate (Edgett, 2009).

While identification of the message source is not usually an issue in advertising, where brand recognition is a key outcome, corporate environmental campaigns are often sponsored by industry associations and have been criticized not only for lack of visibility, but for intentionally obscuring the message source. The terms “front group” and “stealth front group” have been used to describe lack of transparency among industry organizations and identified as an element of deception in greenwashing (Laufer, 2003; Beder, 1997). Certainly corporate
front-group stealth campaigns initiated by seemingly independent third-party organizations that adopt names to hide true interests—such as ExxonMobil’s past funding of the National Wetlands Coalition, an organization that opposed federal efforts to restrict wetlands’ development (Pfau, Haigh, Sims, & Wigley, 2007)—may be considered unethical on their face. Many industry environmental campaigns, however, are often not disguised behind names that suggest objectivity. Rather, industry associations that sponsor media campaigns are typically advocating for the protection of the industry that is represented by the trade association name. The message source is fairly transparent, for example, in a campaign by the American Petroleum Institute advocating for the oil and natural gas industries. Nevertheless, we argue that the burden of identification rests with the campaign sponsor. Even in situations where the message source is fairly transparent, membership within the groups is not. For complete transparency, groups such as the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity (ACCCE) should identify their membership fully through media options with unlimited time/space, such as websites, and as fully as possible in more constrained media, such as advertising. For example, we propose that the criterion for visibility could be satisfied in a TV ad by indicating that the message is sponsored by companies involved in producing electricity from coal.

4. ACCURACY IN DESCRIBING INDUSTRY ACTIVITIES: VERACITY

Perhaps the most common criticism of industry environmental campaigns is that they are guilty of “greenwashing” by presenting exaggerated or unwarranted claims of sustainability or positive environmental impact (Dahl, 2010; Laufer, 2003). Thus, accuracy in describing industry activities is the second criterion for responsible industry environmental campaigns. The term “veracity” has been used to describe this criterion in the literature on ethical public relations advocacy and is defined as full truthfulness in all matters (Edgett, 2009). The criterion of veracity has also been discussed specifically in the context of communicating corporate identity, with the imperative that corporate identity (“what we really are”) should be congruent with communication (“what we say we are”) to avoid deception (Fukukawa, Balmer, & Gray, 2007). According to Sher, a marketing tactic is deceptive if it is intended to “bring about consumer misconception by providing what the marketer believes is false evidence, omitting key evidence, or misrepresenting what the evidence means” (2011, p. 104). Deceptive tactics are considered manipulative and immoral (and a violation of Kant’s practical imperative) unless there are redemptive moral considerations (Sher, 2011), for example, if all truthful possibilities have been ruled out (Edgett, 2009). While the concept of “substantial completeness” has been used to define an acceptable amount of information disclosure in mass communication advocacy situations (Martinson, 1996), “spin,” or presenting facts in a positive light, can still be considered a form of deception if it is intended to bring about consumer misconception (Sher, 2011).

For responsible industry environmental campaigns, advertisers must accurately present claims of sustainability or positive environmental impact. For example, the ExxonMobil ad about the company’s research on using algae as a biofuel was banned by the UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) for overstating the potential of the technology to reduce CO2 levels. In the ad, a scientist says, “In using algae to form biofuels, we’re not competing with the food supply, and they absorb CO2, so they help solve the greenhouse problem as well.” The ASA determined this ad overstated the potential environmental impact of algae as a
biofuel, and was therefore misleading. Although it is true that algae biofuel would not release new CO2 into the atmosphere, the CO2 absorbed by growing algae would be released when it is burned as fuel, and therefore the process would be a break-even proposition, as opposed to yielding a net outcome of absorption (ASA, 2011). While ethical standards are conceptually distinct from regulatory standards, this example illustrates the accuracy in language required for truthful environmental claims.

To achieve veracity, industry environmental campaigns must accurately present claims of sustainability or positive environmental impact. An additional concern related to the accuracy of these campaigns is the tendency to portray environmental initiatives as voluntary while, in fact, the industry’s response may have been government mandated and/or initiated under threat of government prosecution. Such campaigns attempt to downplay an industry’s adverse effects on the environment by exaggerating the efforts of industries to control pollution and/or publicizing adverse effects to the economy that may result from various regulatory efforts (Sinclair & Miller, 2012; Sethi, 1977). One example is BP’s campaign following the Deepwater Horizon oil catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. Ads discuss clean-up activities and highlight the amount of money spent on clean-up and claims, but they do not mention that these actions were required by a legally binding settlement.

We argue that touting improvements or initiatives that have been mandated by the government or a legally binding settlement is deceptive. On the other hand, responsible industry environmental campaigns can discuss these improvements or initiatives, but rather than praising them as if they were self-imposed, the criterion of veracity calls for identifying the laws with which the company or industry complies. This could be a particular settlement, or a statement of compliance with industry environmental regulations such as The Energy Policy Act, the Clean Water Act, and/or the Energy Conservation Act. This disclosure would satisfy the criterion of veracity concerning voluntariness and might, in fact, provide the company with an opportunity to showcase all of the environmental regulations with which they comply as well highlight if/how they might exceed those regulations. Such disclosure provides an opportunity for ethical advocacy that would communicate potentially useful information about industry accountability with audience members (Miller & Sinclair, 2009a; Miller & Sinclair, 2009b; Sinclair & Miller, 2010).

5. APPROPRIATE USE OF VALUES APPEALS: SENSITIVITY

While information about corporate activities may be limited in industry environmental campaigns, the main focus typically involves associating corporate activities with commonly held social values. A common underlying theme is the value of determination and ingenuity as tools to overcome challenges through science. An ad from GE’s “Ecomagination” campaign, for example, references these values through the classic story, The Little Engine that Could: “Can technology and the environment peacefully coexist? Ecomagination answers yes with the Evolution Series locomotive . . . This is the little engine that could. And will.” From a pro-environmental perspective, this type of message seems to embody the “fantasy of technical fixes” and the “siren call of denial” that some have argued characterizes public opinion on the environment (Schellenberger & Nordhaus, 2004, p. 5). It seems the desire to overlook environmental problems—and believe they can be solved by industry—may be reinforced by these campaigns. In fact, empirical findings indicate an industry environmental campaign was successful in generating message acceptance, and further, that message acceptance was
positively correlated with audience member’s level of environmental concern. These findings have significant ethical implications, because they provide evidence that industry environmental campaigns can lead the public to set aside their environmental concerns under the assumption that they are already being addressed.

Based on their potential harm to long-run social welfare in impeding action to address the environmental crisis, sensitivity to social responsibility is the third criterion for responsible industry environmental campaigns. Sensitivity has been defined as a criterion for ethical public relations advocacy that requires balancing recognition that in marketplace advocacy, the organization’s goals are a priority, but these goals must be balanced with social responsibility (Edgett, 2009; Balmer, Powell, Greyser, 2011).

5.1 Empirical Findings: Environmental Concern and Response to an Industry Environmental Campaign

In a U.S. national Web-based survey, participants (N = 235) viewed a message representing an industry environmental campaign: a TV ad for the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity (ACCCE), an industry group made up of companies involved in producing electricity from coal, including coal producers, utility companies, and railroads. This message is typical of industry environmental campaigns’ use of values appeals; the voice-over states “technology born from American ingenuity can achieve amazing things” and goes on to present benefits of clean coal technology in terms of “lower emissions, capture and storage of CO2.”

Using structural equation modeling (SEM), we tested a model that hypothesized that perceptions of corporate accountability and message trust would influence audience members’ motives to identify with the values in the ad, and ultimately their attitude toward the overall issue—namely, perceptions of the advertiser and the advertiser’s environmental impact. The model also hypothesized that environmental concern would moderate the advertisement’s influence on participants’ attitudes toward the issue. Initial model testing, however, revealed that the regression path from environmental concern to attitude toward the issue was not significant. Although one option would have been to remove the environmental concern construct from the model, an alternative hypothesis was proposed that environmental concern might have a direct effect on audience members’ motives to identify with the ad values. In the test of the revised model, the path from environmental concern to audience members’ motives to identify with the ad values was now found to be significant; however, particularly surprisingly, the relationship was shown to be positive rather than negative as hypothesized. Although the test statistic was significant \[ \chi^2 (24, N = 235) = 75.05, p < .001 \], other model fit indices demonstrated a close model fit \[ CFI = .98; NFI = .97; TLI = .97; SRMR = .04 \]. All regression paths in the model were significant, and the model accounted for 94% of the variance associated with the dependent variable, attitude toward the issue. Follow-up analyses revealed that environmental concern had a positive significant relationship with participants’ own motives to identify with the values in the ad; in fact, of all the model variables (including perceptions of the industry’s commitment, intent of the ad message, participants’ motives to share the values of the advertiser, and attitudes toward the advertiser and the advertiser’s environmental impact), environmental concern only negatively impacted perceptions of the transparency of the message and perceptions of government regulation (i.e., the belief that government regulation of companies like ACCCE is adequate).
In post-hoc analyses, when looking at participants who were members of environmental organizations (n=16 of 235), many of the relationships between environmental concern and model variables shifted toward the negative direction, including attitude toward the ad, shared values with the advertiser, and perceptions of the industry’s commitment. (Perceptions of the transparency of the message and adequacy of government regulation also remained negative.) Additionally, a background in science also impacted relationships between environmental concern and the variables under investigation. Several of the relationships that were positive with the full sample were negative when looking only at individuals with a background in science (n=49). Among these participants, higher levels of environmental concern decreased perceptions of government regulation and industry commitment; perceptions of the intent and transparency of the ad; identification with the values conveyed by the ad; and attitudes toward the ad and the advertiser.

5.2 Ethical Implications of Findings

Ethical advocacy requires consideration of, or sensitivity to, social welfare. Even more specifically, responsible advertising has been defined as serving the interest of the advertiser, while also not harming any stakeholder; further, responsible advertising should “(discourage) encourage behaviors trustworthy evidence supports as (in)consistent with long-run social welfare” (Hyman, 2009, p. 202). We argue that the empirical findings discussed here provide evidence that corporate environmental messages (like the ACCCE’s ad) encourage behaviors that are inconsistent with long-run social welfare. The negative affect on society is described more specifically by Davis (1992), who writes that environmental marketing claims can “impede finding real solutions to identified problems by causing consumers to set aside their environment concerns making the assumption that these concerns had been addressed.” If the result is inaction, including failure to adopt changes in policy related to carbon emissions, then environmental consequences can be expected to have a negative effect on the social well-being of current and future generations.

While industry environmental campaigns, such as the ACCCE ad examined, are based strongly on an appeal to values, we argue that values appeals are not irresponsible per se, but must be balanced with accurate information about corporate or industry activities. While critics have debated the ethicality of marketing tactics that attempt to influence consumer decision-making in ways other than providing straightforward, accurate information, scholars in marketing, advertising, and public relations generally agree that non-cognitive, or “image” appeals can be used responsibly (Sher, 2011; Hyman, 2008). In the case of industry environmental campaigns, the appeal to the value of scientific ingenuity and its problem-solving potential—while rather emotionally presented—is not harmful to society in itself, and in fact, it could be a considered a pro-social message to the degree that it is inspirational and promotes scientific inquiry. Indeed, technological innovation is a key component to addressing the environmental crisis. In short, values appeals may be used responsibly in corporate environmental campaigns when they are balanced with substantive information and the intent is to serve societal needs as well as the needs of the organization.

A campaign that relies on a values appeal without providing concrete information on the message sponsor and actual corporate activities could potentially fall under the “sin of vagueness,” one of the ways that companies commit greenwashing according to the consulting group Terrachoice Environmental Marketing (Terrachoice, 2009). From an ethical perspective,
even more significant is the purpose of the values appeal. As Martinson (1996) states, “The practitioner attempting to truthfully persuade should genuinely believe that he or she is assisting the receiver in attaining that which the receiver already implicitly seeks and is in the receiver’s interest” (p. 44).

In the case of corporate environmental campaigns, values appeals are clearly unethical if they are designed to subvert audience members’ environmental concern and encourage them to act against their personal and societal interests—or in this case, not act to pursue those interests. Attempting to undermine people’s decision-making processes has been specifically identified as an unethical marketing tactic. According to Rudinow (1978), manipulation is the attempt to motivate other people’s behavior through altering their goals. This can be achieved either by some type of deception, as discussed in the criteria of visibility and veracity, or by playing on a weakness in the consumer’s normal decision-making process. Sher (2011) similarly defines marketing tactics as manipulative if they are intended to alter normal decision-making processes, for example, by “weakening what the agent believes is the level of rationality of the decision-making process or by reducing the amount of what the agent believes is helpful information available for analysis in that process” (Sher, 2011, p. 102). While the purpose, or the intent, has been identified as key in determining whether a communication tactic is manipulative, an organization can still be considered morally blameworthy for generating a change in stakeholders’ beliefs, desires, or preferences that is detrimental to society (Sher, 2011). While stakeholders themselves undoubtedly have some personal responsibilities in their reaction to advocacy messages, this does not relieve the organization of the need to be sensitive to its social responsibility.

Based on the above, we argue that responsible corporate environmental campaigns cannot use values appeals with the intent of playing on audience members’ vulnerabilities or to undermine audience members’ ability to make good decisions that would be inconsistent with their environmental concern. While image or values-based appeals are not in and of themselves unethical, providing accurate information to the public would clearly aid the responsible communicator in advocating for an organization without undermining audience members’ capacity to make a rational decision. Responsible corporate environmental campaigns should not use values-based appeals in a vacuum; rather, organizations have an obligation to also provide accurate information about the organization’s environmental activities. Where time and space requirements are relatively unlimited, such as websites and corporate reports, this information can be provided in detail. While a 30 or 60 second ad does impose limitations on the amount of information that can be presented, we argue that a values appeal can still be balanced with an accurate statement about the organizations’ current or proposed initiatives to reduce greenhouse emissions or otherwise contribute to environmental sustainability.

6. CONCLUSION

Industry environmental campaigns are a form of persuasive corporate communication that serves the interests of the sponsoring company. Specifically, these campaigns can be described as marketplace advocacy, which protects the organization’s position in the marketplace by building acceptance for its product and processes, reducing current or potential concerns about risks associated with the industry, and defending it against calls for government regulation. We argue that environmental marketplace advocacy is an ethical form of persuasion, but that particular attention is required to avoid the irresponsibility associated with greenwashing and
to fulfill the social responsibility to stakeholders that ideally underlies any form of corporate communication.

The criteria of visibility, veracity, and sensitivity are presented as guidelines for creating ethical corporate environmental campaigns. To satisfy the criterion of visibility, industry environmental campaigns must be transparent about the source of the message, particularly when the source is an industry trade association as opposed to an individual corporation. While deceptive “stealth” front groups are patently unethical, even associations without deceptive names have a responsibility to indicate their membership. The criterion of veracity, meanwhile, requires accurate description of the organization’s activities and their environmental impact. Deception is unethical, and exaggeration or spin must also be avoided. Organizations must also accurately indicate when their environmental initiatives fulfill the requirements of government mandates or legally binding settlements and not discuss these activities as if they are voluntary. Finally, the criterion of sensitivity requires ethical corporate environmental campaigns to balance the interests of the organization with social responsibility.

We report empirical data that indicates individuals’ environmental concern did not decrease favorability of response to an industry environmental campaign, but was positively associated with acceptance of the values-based message, attitude towards the sponsor and its environmental impact. This effect was reduced among environmental organization members and those with a background in science. Values-based messaging in and of itself is not unethical. However, appropriate advocacy must also honor societal and ethical concerns and avoid undermining audience members’ own environmental concern with values-based messages. Ethical corporate environmental campaigns must not present a values-based message in a vacuum, but must balance the values appeal with accurate information about the organization’s environmental activities.

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