

Hotel 'greenwashing' dirties eco-friendly reputation

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Hotel linen reuse sign.

Hotels across the globe are increasingly encouraging guests to embrace green practices. Yet while guests think they are supporting the environment by shutting off lights and reusing towels, they may in fact be victims of "greenwashing," a corporation's deceitful practice of promoting environmentally friendly programs while hiding ulterior motives.

Greenwashing practices, such as a sign that reads "save the planet: re-use towels," coupled with claims of [corporate social responsibility](#), have soiled the trust of American consumers who are increasingly recognizing hotels' green claims may be self-serving. This could cause hotels to lose valuable repeat customers.

Writing in the *Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Washington State University hospitality researchers Imran Rahman, Jeongdoo Park and Christina Geng-qing Chi investigate the consequences of greenwashing in the lodging industry and suggest ways hotels can establish credibility in consumers' minds.

Their paper, "Consequences of 'Greenwashing:' Consumers' Reactions to Hotels' Green Initiatives," comes at a time when as many as 79 percent of travelers worldwide agree that implementing eco-friendly practices is important to their choice of lodging. Research shows a majority are willing to boycott a company if misled.

Causes of consumer skepticism

The researchers surveyed over 3,000 consumers to see whether recognizing a hotel's hidden motive of profit caused them to be skeptical about the hotel's environmental claims and if it influenced their intention to engage in a linen reuse program or to revisit the hotel.

Since environmentally conscious guests are often willing to pay higher premiums for green hotels, the researchers also examined whether their sense of moral obligation would override skepticism and willingness to participate in a linen reuse program or revisit the hotel.

Results indicated that recognition of a self-serving motive indeed made consumers skeptical and unlikely to participate in the green practice or revisit the hotel in the future.

However, researchers found that consumers with high levels of environmental concern still felt morally obligated to participate in the hotel's green initiative, despite realizing its greenwashing tendencies.

"We were surprised to discover consumers with high environmental concern don't have an 'all or nothing' attitude," said Chi. "Our results showed when ecologically conscious consumers know a hotel is not truly green, they will still use the linen reuse program but they will not revisit the hotel."

In addition to recognizing self-serving motives, the researchers suggest several reasons why consumers may balk at believing hotels' green claims. Chi said hotels that fail to integrate green practices throughout their establishment - for example, advertising a linen reuse program but not having recycling bins available - might easily make consumers skeptical, especially if the consumer's comfort is sacrificed in some way.

Consumer skepticism also may build when hotels engage in simple practices, such as discarding disposable toiletry containers, changing the bedding and towels less often or asserting they are green by simply hanging a sign that says they are green. Additionally, if consumers realize hotels have joined commercial green marketing and central reservation associations that don't inspect the credentials of the applicants, they may view this action as unethical, deceptive or even corporate hypocrisy, said the researchers.

Establishing credibility

The researchers suggest several steps hoteliers can take to develop a positive image of their hotel and reduce consumer skepticism. They said the single most important thing is to become certified by independent and credible agencies such as Green Seal and Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED), the two major certification programs in

the lodging industry.

"Having a comprehensive green program, certifications by independent and widely accepted green agencies and communicating the message to customers are key strategies hotels can use to appear more credible in the eyes of consumers," said Chi.

Additionally, the researchers suggest hotels use positive word of mouth to attract customers by posting favorable reviews on websites and social media channels and by training staff to follow the establishment's [green practices](#) and be able to inform guests about them.

"Today's consumers are not always buying the green claims made by hotels," said Chi. "It is imperative that hotels go the extra mile in integrating environmentally friendly practices to develop credibility in [consumers'](#) minds."

More information: The article is available online at www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/10.1108/IJCHM-04-2014-0202

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