

Ruthless Rules for Enviros

As big businesses get eco-religion, don't try to change the players, change the rules.

From: [Issue 119](#) | October 2007 | Page 88 | **By:** David Roberts

Being both commercially ambitious and environmentally conscious once put you in an ostracized and lonely niche--the math club of our civic high school. Now things have gotten all...weird. Titans of commerce are eagerly trying to establish their green bona fides. This has the eco-business nerds somewhat discomfited. Every outsider knows that when the popular kids start making nice, it's time to watch your back. There's a wedgie coming.

This is why every new green corporate initiative gets scrutinized so closely for its true intentions. When a CEO says, "We've figured out a way to make money by going green," those who were green before green was cool are instinctively inclined to suspect deception. Is it green or greenwashing?

For those interested in doing well by doing good, this is an easy question. But it's the wrong one. Does greenwashing happen? Sure. When the guy who designed the Swiffer--those disposable floor wipes--claims that he's saving the world by preventing the use of hot water for mopping, skepticism is warranted. Okay, mockery is warranted.

But the divining of motives, the effort to determine who is and isn't pure, misses a more pragmatic concern: How can genuinely eco-conscious businesspeople make their values more valuable?

Consider how they've done it in the oldest, most robust, and fastest-growing green sector: organic food. No collision between commerce and environment prompts stronger emotion and more accusations of bad faith, a tension that has only been heightened as giant food conglomerates and retail behemoths move into the organic space. But those big players are entering a game where they can't just make up the rules. There has already been a multidecade push to set organic-food standards, first in states and then, with the activation of the USDA National Organic Program in 2001, by the federal government.

The organic standard is the ante to get into the game; good intentions aren't enough. When smaller organic dairies were being squeezed by the "efficiencies" at mega-dairies, they didn't complain about the bad vibes they were getting from agribusiness heavies. They made the USDA enforce its damn rules. A seven-year campaign of raising awareness, lawsuits, and lobbying against Case Vander Eyk Jr. Dairy--a mega-dairy with 10,000 cows, 3,500 of them purportedly organic--ended last June when USDA-accredited organic certifier QAI yanked the company's certification, a first for a mega-dairy. It seems the Eyk cows didn't receive the required pasture access because, uh, there was no pasture.

It may strike some as uncomfortably close to activism, but sometimes the only defense against sheer size and economies of scale is to shape the market itself--to create objective, verifiable benchmarks that let customers know who does and doesn't share their values. Groups such as the Oregon-based Food Alliance, a coalition that includes farmers, ranchers, and food processors, are doing this by creating certifications of their own, with requirements related to soil conservation and labor standards. Other groups are focusing on humane treatment of animals, including the Certified Humane program from Humane Farm Animal Care

and the five-step animal-welfare ratings under development by Whole Foods. Similar, if more nascent, efforts are under way around "food miles," the distance a food travels to reach its point of sale.

What these efforts have in common is that they don't focus on the public postures of individual companies. They're about transparency--making virtue a value-add by enabling customers to express their values. It's easy to get hung up worrying about what's in your competitors' hearts, but it's smarter to worry about what information is in your customers' hands.

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