

The contrarian

NGO openness is a two-way street

Greenpeace should beware of glass houses when throwing stones, says **Jon Entine**

“NGOs ‘lead by example.’” That was the headline last June when Greenpeace and ten other campaigning non-governmental organisations announced, with self-congratulatory fanfare, the creation of an “accountability charter” to demonstrate their commitment to transparency, governance and disclosure. Then reality intervened.

“There is a sizable shortfall relative to their public image and maybe even their own intentions,” says Rob Lloyd, project manager for the Global Accountability Project at One World Trust, the independent NGO funded by the Ford Foundation and other donors, which this month releases its assessment of the accountability policies of NGOs, IGOs (Intergovernmental Organisations) and multinational companies.

In its second annual accountability report, once again, advocacy NGOs lagged badly. The lead stone thrower in the glass house was Greenpeace. “They haven’t done that well,” says Lloyd. “They have quite a way to go.”

The oxygen for NGOs is integrity, so Greenpeace’s performance is especially stunning. Advocacy groups have long used “transparency” to whip the corporate world into their version of shape. So it was not without irony that Greenpeace ranked a dismal ninth out of ten NGOs rated. Almost as surprising, advocacy NGOs – which include such high-profile groups as Doctors Without Borders and Human Rights Watch – overall trail most of the ranked companies, including long-time target General Electric, that are regularly pilloried for – guess what – not being transparent.

As the One World Trust report

makes clear, Greenpeace remains reticent about disclosing its practices in the way that corporations regularly do. It does not engage with companies it hopes to reform, except on its own terms, and it has no institutionalised external oversight of its decision-making. It remains judge and jury when stakeholders complain – a devastating contrast to the growth of independent boards at corporations.

Do not as I do

This critique is hardly new to those familiar with Greenpeace’s tactics. For years it has shrugged at critics, almost suggesting that its lackadaisical commitment to transparency was an ace in the hole for it gave it room to play loose with the facts to bring attention to otherwise ignored issues. It often “won” playing this dangerous game – let’s not forget the Brent Spar fiasco in 1995, when Greenpeace launched a hysteria-driven circus-like campaign, demanding that Shell dismantle the decommissioned rig on land instead of sinking it, as independent scientists recommended. Greenpeace got its way by manipulating the media using hyped data.

One World Trust says that after years of ignoring public criticism of its secrecy, Greenpeace is reforming so as to better walk its talk. But its current campaign against Apple raises red flags. It has made Apple the poster child for the nefarious consumer electronics industry for supposedly building toxic time-bombs, also known as iPhones, iPods and iMacs. It accuses computer manufacturers of making “poison” products and of turning a blind eye to the rogue plastics recycling operations in the developing world that endanger children. But its study is



Greenpeace, heal thyself

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sloppy. When challenged, it pleaded that comprehensive tests were too expensive. When its facts were shown to be thin, it played the all-too-familiar hysteria card, claiming that Apple and its cohorts were driving polar bears to extinction.

If Greenpeace cared as much about the environment as it does about making a splash, it would supplement its focus on a handful of laptop makers (that are among the most responsible companies in this industry) and go after the biggest contributor to toxic problems in the developing world – the extremely high mercury content in made-in-China batteries found in every kiosk throughout the developing world. But Apple makes a “sexier” target, which is especially helpful in raising money.

Advocacy groups play invaluable roles in illuminating overlooked social problems and stirring public and government oversight. But they undermine the causes they purport to support by using non-negotiable ultimatums, deceit, and the bludgeon of transparency, selectively applied. If activist NGOs are going to serve as necessary gadflies, openness is a two-way street. They need standards at least as high as the businesses they criticise. After all, transparency is their brand. ■



**COLUMNIST:
JON ENTINE**

Jon Entine is a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute and a senior editorial consultant to Ethical Corporation.
runjonrun@earthlink.com
www.jonentine.com