

An open letter to GE's PR department

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Hi, GE.

I am your target audience. I wasn't on the distribution list for your GE ecomagination Resource Manual, but some of my colleagues here at [name of think tank] were. Perhaps you didn't like my last post discussing your ecomagination initiative. But I'll overlook that little slight and send you a helpful little critique. The executive summary: efficiency and environmentalism are not identical.

First, when sending a thick, heavy binder about how you're saving the planet, *use recycled paper*. At the least, we econazis like to print things on both sides of the page; knowing that the whole thing could have been half as thick just sorta screams of waste. Shiny paper doesn't even hold ink very well, so I can't even use the back for scrap paper. And if you'd used plain binding instead of the three-ring binder, maybe you wouldn't have needed the heavy cardboard mailing box.

Better still would have been to just put the darn thing on a CD. Then I could share the text with readers, instead of just telling them about it like I'd just seen a movie and am acting out the good parts. Only the ones who are really interested in the rhetoric a corporation uses when attempting to influence policy will read on, whereas if I had a link you could have gotten your glossy message out to the hundreds of people who read this page and randomly click every link.

At least you provide a link for the PDF of your 2006 Citizenship report, whose eco-section provides pretty much the same info.

But enough about form. As for the content, you started out with an endorsement from Jonathan Lash, President of the World Resources Institute. The WRI is a think tank dedicated to helping the environment while still ensuring economic growth. That is, they're the sort of moderates that would get along perfectly with GE. Well done finding (and funding?) such people.

I know you have to sell yourself, but describing modern times as "what [GE] CEO Jeff Immelt calls 'a carbon constrained world' " is a bit pretentious. We, your intended audience, have known about this carbon-constraint thing for a few decades now. This is one step shy of President Bush pointing out that the USA is addicted to oil as if he was the first person to ever realize this. Really, the correct citation is Gaye (1971).

As Mr. Lash points out, setting measurable goals is a good thing, and you get a gold star for setting them. For our readers at home, the goals are:

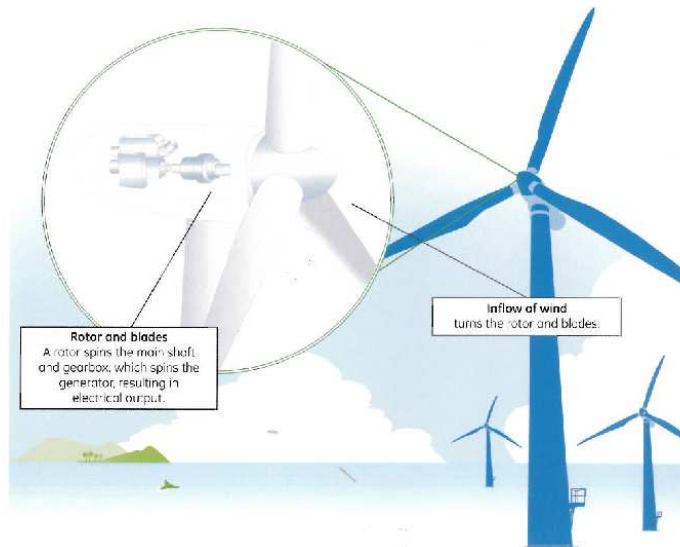


Figure 1: The technical details regarding GE's eco-friendly technology.

double investment in R&D; double revenue from green products; reduce internal greenhouse emissions; and publicly report progress. Your increased R&D is cool—presuming you mean R&D in green technologies—but there are many ways to achieve the other goals while still making the world a dirtier place. It'd be nice if some of your goals were about reducing your ground and water pollution or reducing carbon emissions from the products you sell.

The diagrams are all very nice as illustrations, but they're not very informative. The guy to whom you sent this document was a chemical engineer for a few years before digressing to computational methods for the social sciences—he knows how a turbine works. You could have scored some serious points by showing off your engineering and how you have green technologies that nobody else has. Show us your patents. Below, you'll use lots of numbers about the savings in kWh and kg CO₂ when switching from an unspecified baseline to specific GE product number, but that's just show if it's not followed by micro-level technical specs. As for the illustration, just leave the boxes out and let this be a graceful, bird-free illustration.

[Wind turbines are famous for killing birds by the bushel, including many endangered species. Most other diagrams in the book have a bird floating in the background somewhere.

I recently spoke to a lawyer doing the paperwork for a wind farm, and she told me that the stories about bird-killing are all told by wealthy neighbors who don't want the wind farm spoiling their view. Anybody better informed want

to weigh in on the argument?]

You report that “if just 7 percent of the land area of Arizona were covered with GE’s PV-165 photovoltaic modules, the amount of electricity that could be generated on a sunny day would equal the average daily electricity demand of the entire United States.” The report repeatedly makes statements of the form ‘If everybody using standard [type of product] switched to GE’s version, then the energy equivalent of [a fleet of vehicles or a large number of homes] would be saved.’ First, use of the passive voice is discouraged. You don’t indicate who is switching and how you are creating incentives to get people to make that switch. Are you seriously proposing to cover seven percent of Arizona with solar cells? Second, if we replace ‘Arizona’ in the sentence above with ‘your mom’, you could put some much-needed humor in a rather dull manual.

Third, there’s the point of comparison (from): the typical airplane, locomotive, washing machine, &c was built decades ago, and it would be sad indeed if no progress were made in reducing emissions and improving efficiency over that time. If everybody driving a 1970 Pinto bought a new SUV, emissions would be reduced.

And let me repeat, once more, that nobody is surprised that GE is working to create more efficient products. The real question is: when environmentalism differs from efficiency, which way does GE go? How does this campaign differ from an efficiency campaign?

Fourth, there’s the point of comparison (to): how are efficiency levels for your competitors? Upgrading from a Pinto to an SUV would reduce emissions, but aren’t there ways to reduce emissions more? And forget the industry norm; is GE really on the forefront of any of this, or are there green companies that are doing better but don’t have the resources to send glossy reports to think tanks? Are there other PV cell manufacturers who could power the U.S.A. by covering only five percent of Arizona? Maybe I missed it, but I couldn’t find anything in your report that indicates that you are producing the most environmentally friendly anything.

I was interested to see your desalinization technology, not that the diagram helped me understand it. But it felt like a sleight-of-hand, because GE is known for its pollution of certain waterways, so I was expecting something in the *water* section about keeping waterways clear of high-tech plastics rather than desalinization. You even acknowledge this on the next-to-last page:

At times in the past—when much less was known about how to protect our environment—we have been at odds over how to address historical contamination of waterways and other issues. Some of those disagreements continue today. But we have always acted responsibly, within the guidelines of the law, and done what we believed was in the best interest of our shareowners, communities, and other stakeholders.

... Let’s be clear about this: GE’s obligation is, first and foremost, to our shareholders.

This is the sort of thing where ecomagination really matters: if you can produce efficient plastics, but their production is environmentally destructive, do you keep on producing, or find ways to mitigate environmental damage first? You report (on p 58 of citizenship report linked above) that you had 101 “wastewater exceedences” in 2005, but you don’t tell us how you’ll bring plants demonstrating excesses beyond environmental laws back into line.

In your citizenship report, you claim as one of your points of environmental progress in 2005 that you “Reached an agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on dredging the PCB-containing sediments in the Upper Hudson River”. As the country song goes, you’re trying to have your Kate and Edith too. You can either fight the EPA for years in the hopes that you’ll get off without having to clean up your mess, or you can brag about how cooperative you are with environmental efforts, but doing both is plain old self-contradiction.

Your statement about government’s role—

...We believe that the government can provide leadership by: clarifying policy, committing to “market mechanisms,” promoting diverse energy sources and encouraging an American energy gameplan.

—also indicates a difference between environmentalism and profit-oriented efficiency, because “market mechanisms” (why the scare-quotes? It’s a common English term, no?) frequently favor efficiency over environmentalism. One real difference would be to call for bans on certain processes and chemicals that are harmful, the way that CFCs were banned in the 70s. You don’t call for this, and the silence indicates to me a lack of imagination about eco-problems.

As a digression, I certainly agree about your statement about how government needs to clarify policy. We had a White House advisor over last week:

Me: Mr. Advisor, if I may speak broadly, scientists hate Bush. What is President Bush doing about this?

Advisor: I don’t know why that’s so, because he doubled funding in hydrogen cell research.

Me: But they still distrust him. And doesn’t that seem like too little too late?

Advisor: He *doubled* it.

[Just to clarify, this actually happened, and most of the room was frustrated by the advisor’s refusal to honestly discuss Dubya’s alienation of the sciences, mostly preferring to defend the President’s preference of the religious right over the fetus-killing scientists. But the dialogue above is a dramatization.]

We’re all pretty tired of the lack of a serious energy policy from the US government, so amen to you, GE PR.

However, I would like to see more from you. Nobody anywhere really prefers inefficiently achieving goals over efficiently achieving them, but the question of what those goals should be remains, and is unanswered by your Resource Manual. Are there conditions where you would recommend steps that would reduce demand for your products? Power companies do this all day long: my electric bill always includes a little flyer reminding me to turn off lights and check

my furnace filter. But it seems your goal of doubling profits from green products makes it impossible for you to advocate reduction of energy-using goods.

You advertise how much more efficient your trains are than automobiles, but then you also brag about your plane engines, which are orders of magnitude less efficient; would you press governors for more spending on passenger rail? You mention the cleanliness of nuclear power, but why aren't you pressing for this in your PR (instead of burying it on the last few pages); are you lobbying government for this? If you're really interested in environmental efficiency of all types, and not just vending energy-efficient products, why is there any continuing disagreement over contamination of waterways at all?

So there you have it. Is GE more ecofriendly than its competitors? Is GE aiming to reduce energy use or just talking people into spending money replacing their old Pintos with new SUVs? Is GE willing to accept or recommend restrictions that would force its hand into not using certain toxins? I had these questions before reading your report, and I encourage both of my readers to ask these questions of any corporate eco-PR they should come upon. You've omitted answers in the information you sent to the think tank, and the fact that your reports are silent on issues of non-energy pollution, the potential for government imposition of CFC-like bans on especially onerous environmental problems, and how we will actually go about covering seven percent of Arizona with solar cells indicates that you have not yet jumped the gap between efficiency and ecomagination.