

There's a word to describe Casella's recent PR blitz: greenwashing



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"Casella's management and its directors may very well be committed to sustainability as a concept, but it is a huge stretch for the company to promote itself as being in the sustainability business." (File photo by Amanda Gokee/New Hampshire Bulletin)

When we read or hear a claim repeated over and over again, we are more likely to think it is true even when it is not true. It's called the illusory truth effect, and it's why repetition is a fundamental tool used, yes, in politics, but especially in consumer product advertising. And more and more it's being used by corporations to highlight their sunny side whenever the corporation's reputation as a good corporate citizen comes into question.

A case in point is Casella's recent [campaign](#) to convince New Hampshire that when it comes to the environment, Casella is one of the "good guys." The company has unleashed what amounts to a public relations blitz, emphasizing its commitment to environmental sustainability.

Just in the last week Casella offered up a "Special Advertising Section" in New Hampshire Magazine titled "Casella Comes Full Circle for its Anniversary," suggesting that though it started in the trash business it is now in the sustainability business. That comes on top of a number of other recent actions by the company, including a national press release announcing its "2024 Sustainability Report"; a mailer to residents of New Hampshire's North Country titled "Driving Sustainability in NH"; and a \$1.5 million donation to the University of Vermont for which the University gave it naming rights to establish the "Casella Center for Circular Economy and Sustainability at UVM."

All this smacks of "greenwashing," a practice roughly defined as a company using corporate money and its public relations apparatus to mislead people into believing that it is more environmentally friendly than it actually is.

Casella's management and its directors may very well be committed to sustainability as a concept, but it is a huge stretch for the company to promote itself as being in the sustainability business. Casella's core business is trash collection and landfiling, essentially the antithesis of sustainability. According to Casella's most recent filings to the Securities and Exchange Commission, only 20% of its revenues come from business activities (such as recycling) that are even remotely connected to sustainability.

And there is little to no indication that going forward Casella will focus on sustainability. It tells its investors that its growth will be fueled by acquisitions of trash collection service territories, necessitating the need for construction and/or expansion of new landfills across the Northeast.

Casella likes to talk about its origin story: It started in 1975 with one truck picking up trash in Rutland, Vermont. In 50 years it has grown to be a \$7 billion corporation, with nearly \$1.5 billion in annual revenue.

What the company does not like to talk about is all of the environmental problems it has created, and all of the enemies it has made along the way to becoming a \$7 billion corporation.

Casella has trash operations all over the Northeast, but it is an especially big player in northern New England. In New Hampshire, it operates one of three major landfills — the NCES landfill in Bethlehem.

The NCES landfill has been beset by environmental problems. It was only recently discovered that holes in the landfill liner were created during the construction of the landfill some 30 years ago; the consequences for contamination of nearby water supplies and groundwater are as yet unknown. And it took Casella two full days to discover that the largest leachate spill in New England (150,000-plus gallons) occurred at NCES in 2021. Now four years later, the extent of soil and groundwater contamination from the accident is still under investigation.

These are not isolated incidents. New Hampshire's Department of Environmental Services (DES) notified NCES that it had found hundreds of permit violations for leachate management during a recent two-year period. In contrast, DES found only a few handfuls of similar violations at other New Hampshire landfills, including Mount Carberry and Turnkey, which other than management competence are similar to NCES.

With that kind of record, it's little wonder that Casella would want to use its public relations apparatus to bill itself as in the sustainability business. This is especially true given the fact that it has been trying for six years to bully our state to approve permits for it to build a new mega-landfill (the GSL project) in Dalton. It has even

suggested that it would not invest in a newly planned recycling center in downstate New Hampshire unless it gets permits to build GSL.

It's to our great good luck that we now have a governor who is standing up to that bullying, a redirected DES that is more focused on environmental protection, and an educated populace that is able to recognize greenwashing for what it is.