

Why Industry is Going Green on the Quiet

In developed nations we live in an unprecedented world of super-consumption. We love to consume and it is firmly engrained as a social norm. The singer Lily Allen has it about right:

*I am a weapon of massive consumption /
It's not my fault/
it's how I'm programmed to function.*

But it's clear we cannot go on this way. We must adapt our societies and economies to sustainable patterns of consumption as soon as we can.

There's a factory in Asia that uses only a single litre of water to make a pair of jeans. That's 346 litres less than Levi-Strauss estimated it took to make a pair of its jeans in 2015. Wouldn't you love to buy your jeans from this amazingly innovative factory? Me too, but I don't even know what it's called.

The manufacturer in question is one of many practising "secret sustainability", whereby innovations are silently enacted and kept from the rest of the industry.

Two Portuguese wineries that have quietly switched from conventional to organic practices made the switch out of concern for the health of their soils. Instead of buying pesticides and artificial fertilisers, they have invested heavily in labour and technology. They now use drones with sophisticated sensors, and employ software that can predict potential issues affecting soil or vine health. The result is healthier soil, healthier vines and an 18% harvest increase per hectare, with a significantly reduced environmental footprint. And they haven't told their retail customers.

They hadn't increased the cost of making wine as they shifted to organic practice. They feared that if they raised their prices, they risked making their wine unaffordable to their current customers. Why rock the boat?

There are other reasons why manufacturers keep quiet about their sustainable practices. After 15 years of dedicated effort, a well-known car manufacturer reduced the amount of energy it took to make its cars by 75%: it can now make four cars using the same amount of energy it formerly took to make one. The manufacturer refused to tell the world, not because the innovations were trade secrets, or because it risked losing a cost-saving competitive, but because it was to attract unwanted attention to parts of its operation that were less sustainable, potentially sparking accusations of "green-washing". Brands must ensure they walk the walk as well as talk the talk.