

## How to Build -- or Damage -- Your Green Cred

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While business played a lower profile at [COP15](#) than in the past, there was at least one memorable PR moment that holds important lessons for businesses on how to build -- or damage -- a reputation for sustainability.

The example I want to use is from the small Dutch energy company, [Essent B.V.](#), now owned by German multinational [RWE](#).

In the fall of 2009, Essent launched an innovative public relations campaign leading up to the UNFCCC conference in Copenhagen. They bought 100 electric vehicles and chose 100 Dutch students to drive the green scooters to Copenhagen and engage in educational activities en route. Students had to apply and those deemed most committed to climate action drove on The Road to Copenhagen (R2C).

Essent also launched a fun viral campaign in support of R2C. The promotional [YouTube video](#) shows young men and women happily scooting to Copenhagen, with slogans like "Generate ideas with other people" and "Present your solutions @ COP15." Essent positioned itself as a big supporter of youth civil society who were driving to make their opinions on climate change heard in Copenhagen.



The drive took 10 days, with youth participants stopping each day to hear lectures on clean energy, climate and sustainable development. Dutch media covered this in various formats.

R2C participants learned a lot -- many of them did not have much in-depth knowledge of climate change in advance, but became increasingly committed as they gained exposure "On the Road." R2C also developed a "Climate Manifesto," which they intended to present to fellow Dutchman Yvo de Boer when they arrived in Copenhagen.

This all sounds good. (If you work for an energy company, you might wonder why you didn't think of it). The trouble is that this actually is an example of light green reputation-building at best, or deep greenwashing at worse.

Why so?

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**PAGE 2/3**

First of all, the parent company RWE is a longtime target of Greenpeace for their clean coal and nuclear programs. Essent can't avoid this association with happy scooters and a viral campaign -- indeed, NGO activists met the scooters at the German border and handed each of the drivers a lump of coal.

Some of the scooter-kids were a bit confused and embarrassed -- they didn't know about RWE or the clean coal controversy. They couldn't imagine why anyone would protest their fun clean drive. This made them appear like ill-informed, superficial tourists rather than knowledgeable members of the social movement on climate change. The "real" NGO activists tried to educate them about RWE's poor track record on renewable energy in Germany.

Then, when the scooter-kids arrived in Copenhagen, three went immediately to the [Bella Centre](#) (the site of COP15) to present their manifesto directly to Yvo de Boer. Coincidentally, this was the same [infamous Monday](#) where thousands of official observers from civil society and science were held up outside the conference gates for eight hours, with no food, drink or toilets.

This was also when the second reputation issue came into play. Surprisingly, when the scooter-kids (easily recognizable with bright orange R2C helmets) arrived at 3 p.m., they were only in line long enough to giggle before they were whisked through the gates.

Left behind were unlucky, mostly middle-aged, middle-class people patiently waiting in line who were actually scientists, members of the press, and representatives of many well known NGOs.

They were *not* happy at R2C jumping the COP15 queue. This is understandable given that many of them missed their own official side-events and probably none got to meet with de Boer.

One might ask, why had the R2C gang gotten such VIP treatment? It gave the impression that the pressing media event with de Boer where they handed over their climate manifesto was given higher priority than side-events within the UNFCCC that day. Given the shut-out of the rest of civil society in Copenhagen, this bordered on the ridiculous.

Most importantly, with an eye on the future, this type of publicity stunt easily leaves Essent open to accusations of superficial greenwash and corporate cronyism. (Just how did they get that meeting with de Boer when the rest of civil society stood outside?)

The third reputation issue surfaced post-Copenhagen when R2C started to ask for buyers for the electric scooters via Twitter. Less than a month after the weak Copenhagen Accord was "noted," Essent didn't have any ongoing plans for the electric scooters.

The overarching lesson here is that when a green energy company wants to actively promote its green credentials at important meetings like COP15, it should do so in a way that illustrates a deep and long-term commitment to the issue and to civil society.

For instance, a company could engage with a variety of different (and critical) climate change groups on a regular basis as opposed to only focusing on one moment in time.

A company may consider participating in civil society programs like KlimaForum (the people's summit at COP15) and not just focus on media opportunities with the UN or national governments.

A company could ensure that it had ongoing plans for props like electric scooters (e.g., as donations to civil society groups).

Finally, a company presenting itself as a meaningful part of the social movement on climate change could have voiced concern over the UNFCCC shut-out of civil society in Copenhagen.

To build a truly sustainable business reputation, energy companies have to do more than promote youth tourism in [Mexico City \(COP16\)](#). Sustainable companies need to demonstrate real commitment to the ongoing UNFCCC process.

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PAGE 3/3



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