

Earth Day 2022: Firms put off climate action by 'greenwash' backlash

Many big businesses are put off from announcing green initiatives as they are worried about potential public backlash, according to one of the co-founders of a Bristol-based environmental group.

Ecologi is a climate action tech platform, created in 2019, that helps companies to measure and reduce their carbon footprint, while it also coordinates climate offset projects and tree planting around the world.

Last year the firm received £4m backing from US venture capitalist group General Catalyst – one of the early investors in 'unicorn' tech giants Airbnb and Deliveroo.

The company estimates it has planted nearly 40 million trees and offset 1.68 million tonnes of CO2 emissions through its more than 30,000 subscribers, which include individuals, SMEs and big firms such as Vodafone and Co-op.

One of the company's four co-founders, Ian Hambleton, told *BusinessLive* initiatives such as 'net zero' had caught the imagination of small and large businesses, and companies were taking sustainability more seriously than 15 years ago, with consumers increasingly expecting it from them.

Mr Hambleton, Ecologi's special ops director, said while many more big firms now want to make their operations more environmentally-friendly, some are concerned they could leave themselves open to criticism and accusations of 'greenwashing'.

He said Ecologi had encountered lots of big manufacturers and

retailers which do not want to talk about their greener initiatives as they fear they would put themselves on “dodgy ground” due to perceptions about their previous operations.

Mr Hambleton said: “Without naming names, there is a big confectionary maker doing some amazing initiatives, bringing in recycled materials, offsetting, doing great things that you would think they would want to talk about.

“[But] hey know that the moment they put their head above the parapet on Twitter and say, ‘Oh we have this great new initiative’, they’re worried about the haters that will encircle them. But what’s great is they are increasingly committed towards the climate.”



(Image: Ecologi)

Mr Hambleton said Ecologi as a company itself had to be “really clever” about making sure businesses were not using its platform to greenwash themselves. He revealed there had been “numerous” companies that approached Ecologi but it had decided not to promote them.

According to Mr Hambleton, there is a section of society that is looking for a “perfect solution” to the climate crisis but businesses which are willing to change to greener operations needed to be embraced in order to solve the issue.

Mr Hambleton said: “The more that people jump straight away to criticise, the less people will do because they are worried about the backlash. There’s a negative side to that criticism. It’s far better that businesses are doing something than not doing anything.

“There’s a way that we need to adapt as a society to say, ‘you’re doing great but you could do a bit more’. That would be a better message than just pulling things down.”

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It comes as new research published by Ecologi for global environmental awareness event Earth Day (April 22) finds eight in 10 UK SME owners want to be greener but struggle due to a lack of guidance.

The survey of 500 business owners found 83% feel the Government needs to do more to educate and support them in their sustainability efforts.

Despite a high level of environmental concern, particularly following the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow last year, more than half of surveyed entrepreneurs said they were reluctant to introduce a sustainability policy as they feel it is too late to reverse climate change.

Ecologi has received the support of entrepreneur and investor on BBC series *Dragons' Den* Steven Bartlett for the launch of its Earth Day campaign.

This Earth Day, we're celebrating the power of possible

We've teamed up with [@SteveBartlettSC](#) to paint a picture of hope for our planet and remind us what's possible through collective action.

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– Ecologi (@Ecologi_hq)

Mr Bartlett said: “From these survey results it is clear that more guidance needs to be given to navigate around a very important but overwhelming climate situation, whether it's providing more funding from the government, receiving training on how to tackle the issues or signing up for a climate action platform, like Ecologi.

“There's no denying it's companies like theirs who are so instrumental to helping organisations be more sustainable, and if every business takes a small action it will amount to a significant change.”

Elliot Coad, chief executive and co-founder of Ecologi, added: “It's promising to see how many businesses are already trying

to make sustainable changes, but concerning that so many are still confused and some even believe it's too late to make a difference.

“The smallest of changes can have a big impact, so we want to help SMEs realise this and understand the steps they can take to help the environment. Through collective action, individuals and businesses can have a real, tangible impact in combating climate change.”

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