



Procter & Gamble's 2004 sustainability report

The consumer products behemoth has released its 6th annual opus

Procter & Gamble has rolled out the next volume in its sustainability reporting series. In terms of tone and format, the 68-page pdf tome is remarkably consistent with previous years' reports. Unfortunately, the blandness of the presentation buries P&G's exciting approach to sustainable capitalism under plodding recitations of standard policies.

Several omissions further decrease the value of the report. Quantitative goals and targets are almost wholly absent, although many environmental and social performance statistics based on the Global Reporting Initiative are duly tracked. Also missing is an assurance statement, or even the briefest commentary on why the \$51 billion company is unwilling to undertake report verification. P&G enjoys its position as the Dow Jones Sustainability Index leader in the household products sector and has received numerous environmental, social, and financial awards – but that excellence apparently doesn't translate into world-class reporting.

Sifting – scrolling – through the data

P&G partially addresses the problem of report length by providing a shorter summary document. The summary groups together much of the data in the full report in a snapshot of the company's performance. The chief executive's statement and the introduction from the director of corporate sustainable development are also left intact, highlighting main accomplishments, core values and strategic directions.

Both the summary and the full report are available on P&G's website – and only on the website. The electronic format forces readers either to develop computer eye-strain or bear the costs and inconvenience of printing the report themselves. Stakeholders that don't have a computer, a fast internet connection and a reliable printer are out of luck.

What's more, the online format fails to take advantage of the internet's data-storage and search capabilities. The 2004 report includes quantitative data for only the past three years, a curious tactic given that P&G has been using the same indica-

tors since 1999. The company should place full data sets on the web to allow readers to track long-term progress.

Indeed, a full review of web materials is overdue: the online sustainability FAQs blithely herald P&G's next sustainability report – in 2001.

Relevance as content screen

In order to distil the company's global performance into an accessible format, P&G prioritises issues according to their overall significance and impact. For example, P&G reports greenhouse gas emissions but discusses climate change only briefly, as the company's contributions to global climate change are small compared with those of other industry sectors. Conversely, much text is devoted to water use and efficiency throughout the entire product lifecycle.

P&G could slim down its report by prioritising additional issues. For example, there seems to be little benefit to listing each facility, every industry association and every award received. Such information could easily be parked on the company's website, along with standard information on policy and programmes. Some topics could be eliminated outright – such as a page devoted to P&G's "billion-dollar brands", absurdly featuring advertising slogans.

Sustainable capitalism

The most intriguing aspect of P&G's report is the description of how the company has come to define sustainability as a "corporate social opportunity". In his opening letter, P&G's director of corporate sustainable development,

