

Donald W. Reynolds
National Center
for **Business Journalism**

“GREEN” REPORTING
IN BUSINESS NEWS SECTIONS

Research Study
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Donald W. Reynolds National Center for Business Journalism

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www.BusinessJournalism.org

I. Introduction

What's black and white and green all over? The answer, to riff on the old children's riddle, is the business press.

"Green," the headline writer's favorite shorthand for "environmental sustainability," has become a reliable story element on the nation's business pages, websites and financial news channels. A content analysis of archived stories and other data shows that "green" business stories have mushroomed this year; more than half of all the "green" business stories published since 2000 were printed in 2007 alone.

Consider these headlines, culled at random from hundreds of "green" business section stories indexed this year by the LexisNexis news database:

- "Wal-Mart lends buying power to cities for green technology"
- "Green collars emerge; Workplace eco-stewards make up new job classification"
- "It looks good on paper; Printer goes green for profit, pride"
- "State companies see big gains ahead tackling greenhouse gases"
- "Bait shop owners see green options for site"
- "Oregon markets 'green' building industry"
- "Environment onboard; Calif. company to make 'green' skateboards in Ithaca"
- "Washington's small businesses tap into green power"
- "FedEx shows off its green side with hybrid trucks"

It seems that every size of business from Wal-Mart and FedEx to bait shops and skateboard builders have discovered that almost any practice that could be considered as environmentally friendly might generate a nice story in the morning paper. The demonstrated interest in such stories also has spawned a thriving public relations specialty focused on getting "green" press releases to business journalists.

II. Content Analysis

Sample Size

- A content analysis of 154 “green” themed business stories published since 2000 in the nation’s 10 largest newspapers
- Searches of the LexisNexis news database for business-section stories using terms like “green” and “environmental” and “sustainable” or “sustainability”

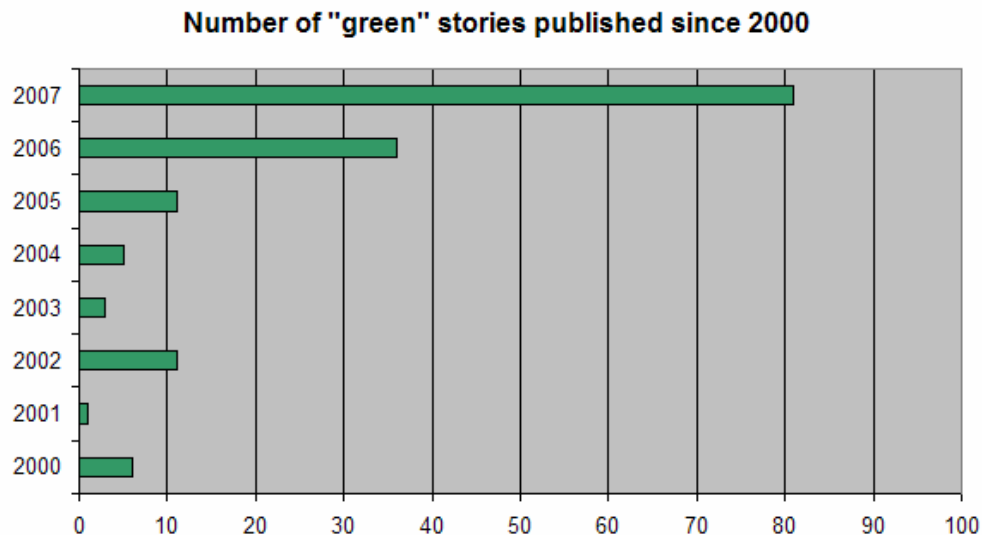
Methodology

This research report attempted to measure the growth of “green” business reporting by analysis of data gathered from several sources, including newspapers, Lexis/Nexis search engine, blogs and corporate press releases. Archives of stories with a green theme at the nation’s top ten newspapers, dating back to 2000, were analyzed.

However, the conclusions of this analysis must be considered approximate at best, for a variety of reasons. For one, the various newspaper archive search engines vary widely in the content they offer. *The Wall Street Journal*, for instance, goes back only six months; anything earlier requires a paid account with an outside database service. Most archive search engines don’t let you specify stories from a particular section. Search terms like “green” and “sustainability” also tend to show up in business stories that have nothing to do with environmental sustainability, but the search term “environment” might not be used at all in such a target story.

Key Findings

- The archives of the top 10 papers revealed some clear patterns. Of the 154 “green” business stories in the archives since 2000, well over half of them (81) were published in 2007, even with 10 weeks left to go in the year. And three-quarters of them were written since the beginning of 2006.

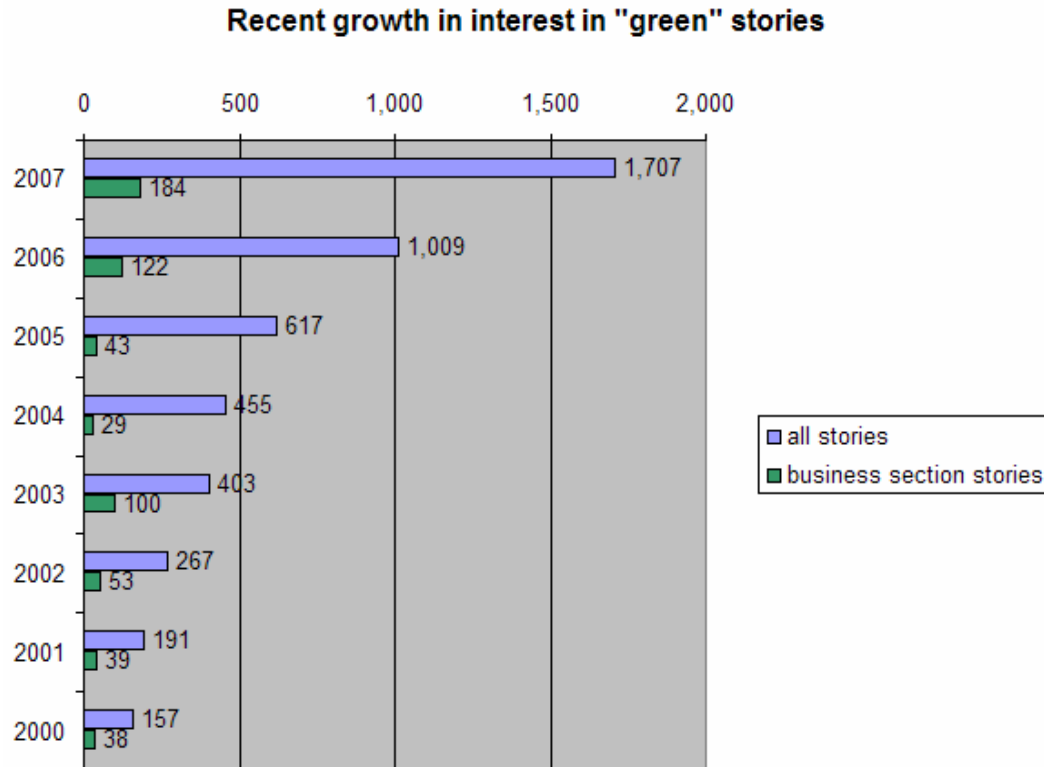


The explosion of interest in publishing “green” stories is evident in the chart above. As the chart shows, the number of “green” business stories this year more than doubled from the previous year, and is nearly seven times greater than the number published the year before that. Nearly five times as many “green” stories will be printed by the end of this year alone than in the five-year period from 2000 through 2004.

- Based on the archive findings, *New York Times* business journalists have been the leaders among the biggest papers in writing business stories focused on environmental sustainability. *The Times’* archive shows 44 such stories since 2000, with 21 of those in 2007 and another 13 in 2006. (And that doesn’t include the Times’ 12-page “Business of Green” special section that ran in Nov. 7, after the study period ended; perhaps predictably, nearly half of the section was ads from companies touting their environmental credentials.)
- It should be pointed out, however, that the interest of business editors in “green” stories simply mirrors the attention being paid to stories about environmental sustainability in virtually every other section of newspapers and other news websites. For example, the *New York Times’* 44 “green” business section stories are among nearly 500 stories using the term “sustainability” since 2000. A similar search in *The Boston Globe* found 15 business stories among more than 300 stories in other sections of the paper. Such non-business stories range from coverage of Al Gore’s Nobel Prize to tips on how to grow lawns with less water.
- A Lexis/Nexis search for “sustainability” alone found 1,707 articles just in October of 2007, printed in 133 different newspapers, ranging from giants like *The New York Times*

and *The Washington Post* to the *Kalamazoo Gazette* and the *Bangor Daily News*. However, the same pattern noted above -- of “green” business section stories being a fraction of the total -- was seen in the Lexis/Nexis search. Of the 1,707 stories found by Lexis/Nexis, just 184 of them were business section stories.

As with the count of stories from the 10 largest papers, the Lexis/Nexis searches also track the recent growth in interest in “green” stories, business section or otherwise, as can be seen in the chart below.



- Of course, newspapers aren't alone in covering “green” business stories. The archive of CNBC.com, for instance, lists 388 sustainability stories, along with 11 video segments. MSNBC's archive shows more than 1,100 such stories, although most were written by wire service reporters.

Corporate Public Relations

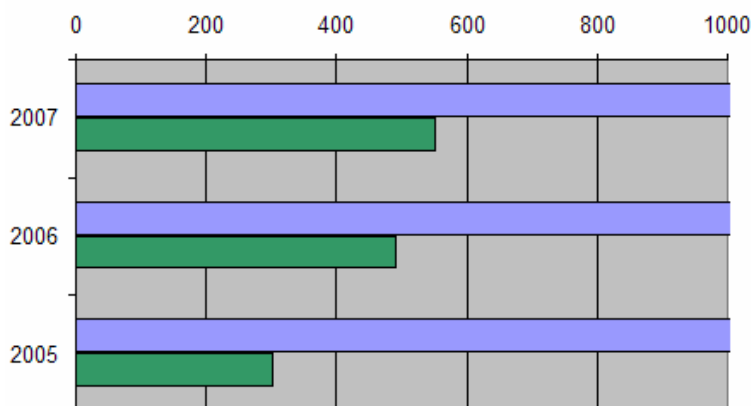
Predictably, the increased attention on environmental sustainability among business news sites has generated a similar explosion of press releases and wire services devoted to pitching “green” stories. One of the leading purveyors of such stories is CSRwire, which distributes press releases from members under the larger banner of “corporate social responsibility.” CSRwire claims to reach “hundreds of thousands of journalists, analysts, investors, activists, academics, public relations and investor relations professionals worldwide.”

So far in 2007, CSRwire has sent out 551 releases about all manner of environmental good works by corporations, governments and other organizations. The releases offered such headlines as these:

- “Alcoa Testifies in Support of Climate Security Act”
- “Baxter Highlights Recent Sustainability Activities and Recognition”
- “From Worm Poop to Wal-Mart”
- “HotelsCombined.com Goes Green with CarbonFund.org”
- “Manheim and Autotrader Publishing Host First-Ever ‘Green’ Vehicle Sale”
- “Nike, Converse to Use Liquefied Natural Gas Trucks...”
- “Pure Tech Waters of America Helps Make Hartford Marathon Green”
- “UPS Expands “Green Fleet” With 306 Alternative Fuel Vehicles”
- “You Can Buy Virgin Paper and Help Protect The World's Forests”

That flood of 551 releases in the first 10 months of 2007 compares to 490 such releases in all of 2006, and 301 in 2005. In 2000, CSRwire’s first full year of operation, there were just 90 such releases focusing on corporate environmental actions.

Growth in “green” press releases



Another big vendor of “green” press releases is Environmental News Service, which claims more than 100,000 subscribers, including more than 500 media clients from *The New York Times* and ABC News to the *Tahoe Daily Tribune* and many small-market television and radio stations. The ENS search engine shows 483 releases on sustainability. Some of those, however, arguably stretch the boundaries of environmental consciousness; consider the lead of this recent release: “While not every woman can afford to purchase a hybrid car, more women than ever are aware that their monthly feminine hygiene choice can also create a positive eco-footprint.”

PR Newswire, a major distributor of business press releases on any subject, also has sent out many with a “green” angle. In 2007, PR Newswire distributed 1,466 press releases talking about sustainability; compare that to 2000, when just 212 PR Newswire releases mentioned the word.

Websites

The heightened interest by corporations in touting their “green” credentials has spawned numerous websites and blogs devoted to the topic.

- An early player in the field is SustainableBusiness.com, which was started in 1996.
 - ✓ The site offers “green” business news and news for investors, compiled from news outlets, wire services and press releases.
 - ✓ In the past 5 years, SustainableBusiness.com’s archive shows it published 969 articles with “green” in the headline.
 - ✓ About 20% of the stories were written by SustainableBusiness.com staff, but stories from Reuters, the Associated Press, and various newspapers and business publications also were used.
- Yet another is GreenBiz.com, with the slogan “Business, the environment, the bottom line.”
 - ✓ The site’s search engine returns more than 4,600 articles and press releases focused on sustainability.

Blogs

Hundreds of “green business” blogs exist, with names like Sustainablog, Tree Hugger, Mr. Green, Eco Chick and Ecorazzi. Some are national in scope; many others offer commentary about local environmental actions or their own efforts at achieving environmental sustainability.

Not all the business journalism about “green” corporate practices is positive, however. For instance, a contrarian story in the October 29 issue of *Business Week*, written by Ben Elgin, challenges the feel-good announcements made by many corporations about major reductions in their environmental “footprints.” Elgin’s story, titled “Little Green Lies,” acknowledges that some companies have made real contributions, such as Wal-Mart’s decision to push fluorescent bulbs. But Elgin focuses on a corporate sustainability executive who has grown outspokenly pessimistic about the conventional wisdom that “green” practices actually help the bottom line with a positive return on investment. Many of the suspect claims, Elgin writes, involve the use of “renewable energy credits,” which supposedly finance others to develop pollution-free energy but actually find it difficult to show any real impact. “Much corporate environmentalism boils down to misleading statistics and hype,” the article states flatly.

Forbes magazine, which has done dozens of stories about “green” business practices, also has contributed reporting that compares corporate sustainability claims to reality. A July 3 article by Andrew T. Gillies followed up on the 2005 creation of the Business Roundtable’s “S.E.E. Change” (for Society, Environment and Economy) initiative. So far, just 28 of the organization’s 150 member companies have committed to the plan, and *Forbes* called it “green spin.”

III. Survey

Methodology

Over a hundred editors were sent emails describing the short online survey and inviting them to respond. Despite two follow-up requests to the group, only 17 editors ultimately offered their opinions. This low response rate is typical of such surveys, so the results reported here must be considered only suggestive.

Key Findings

- The 17 business editors who responded to the Reynolds Center survey, all from midsize or large papers, were nearly unanimous that interest in “green” business stories had increased dramatically in recent years.
 - ✓ None of them felt that the interest had peaked yet.
 - ✓ All said that their sections ran such stories at least a couple of times a month.
 - ✓ Nearly half said that business stories with a “green” angle of some sort appeared as often as once a week.
- Despite the acknowledged interest, none of the editors said that they had a business reporter whose full-time beat focused on corporate sustainability efforts.
 - ✓ The stories typically are handled as general assignment.
 - ✓ A few papers have a specific reporter who does “green” stories along with other business coverage.
- Not surprisingly, business journalists are wary about acknowledging press releases as a reason for devoting significant space to “green” stories. The editors were asked which of several sources drive their coverage of “green” business stories; they could pick as many sources as applied.
 - ✓ Only a couple of them said that story ideas from corporate public relations shops fed interest in stories about sustainability.
 - ✓ Most cited their own interest and that of one or more of their staff writers.
 - ✓ About half added the interest of business section readers and compelling wire service stories as driving such coverage.
- Asked more specifically about the sources used to generate story ideas, more than half said they “almost never” developed stories pitched in press releases by national companies, and only “occasionally” used ideas from local company releases.
 - ✓ The source cited most often was the enterprise of business section staffers.
 - ✓ Direct assignments from business section editors, and wire copy, came next.

- ✓ Most said that story suggestions from readers at least occasionally produced usable story ideas.
- Skepticism about the motivation for corporate sustainability efforts also was evident in the survey.
 - ✓ Only a quarter of the editors said they “strongly agree” with the statement “Companies practice sustainability because it makes good bottom-line business sense.”
 - ✓ Almost all of them agreed at least somewhat with the statement “Companies publicize sustainability efforts mostly to enhance their public image.”
 - ✓ Finally, all of the editors agreed that business journalists need more training in coverage of sustainability issues.

IV. Resources

Business journalists who are interested doing stories on corporate sustainability and other “green” business issues can find information in a variety of places.

1. Membership to the Society of Environmental Journalists site, at www.sej.org. SEJ membership is only \$45 a year, and it gives its 1,300 members access to a quarterly newsletter, a biweekly tipsheet of story ideas, and an indexed online directory of hundreds of environmental sites rated for quality by SEJ.
2. The Society of American Business Editors and Writers (www.sabew.com) \$50 per year for business journalists.
3. Yet another journalists-helping-journalists organization is Investigative Reporters & Editors (IRE), at www.ire.org. IRE membership is \$60 per year. IRE’s 5,000 members get access to an indexed archive of more than 23,000 stories, more than 3,000 tipsheets, the bimonthly IRE Journal, and a catalog of training courses, seminars and workshops.
4. CSRwire and Environmental News Service, mentioned above, both offer email news alerts. So do websites like SustainableBusiness.com and GreenBiz.com.

About The Reynolds Center

More than 6,000 working journalists around the country over the past four years have taken part in workshops, online seminars and online tutorials of the Donald W. Reynolds National Center for Business Journalism, which is headquartered at the Arizona State University Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communications.

The Reynolds Center is funded by the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, a national philanthropic organization founded in 1954 by the late media entrepreneur for whom it is named. Headquartered in Las Vegas, Nevada, it is one of the largest private foundations in the United States.

The Cronkite School is a leading professional journalism college with 1,700 undergraduate and master's students.

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