

Is easyJet's carbon pledge just a case of greenwashing?

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Going green is all the rage in corporate Britain. So is greenwashing. In which category should we put easyJet's bold pledge to be “the world's first major airline to operate net-zero carbon flights”?

This was announced amid great fanfare alongside the airline's final results (it finished strongly after a tough year).

It took up a large part of a lengthy presentation that featured contributions from various guest speakers, including Airbus's Glenn Llewellyn, who holds the title of vice president of zero emissions technology

EasyJet has launched a partnership with the plane maker with a view to furthering the development of hybrid and electric aircraft. But, said CEO Johan Lundgren, until the technology is available to radically reduce emissions, offsetting is the best way forward.

To show just how much easyJet is doing on that front there were a lot of slides, a lot of talk, a lot of names to ram home the message.

We're partnering with Climate Focus, “an international advisory company committed to the development of policies and programmes that mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change”.

And “only programmes which meet either the Gold Standard or Verified Carbon Standard (VCS) accreditation, which are globally recognised and respected for their standards of offsetting, will be used”.

And “these accreditors ensure that the carbon reductions claimed by individual programmes would not have happened without that project, or that by reducing carbon emissions in one place they do not inadvertently increase them elsewhere”.

A bit of context. Before Lundgren's arrival the company had, shall we say, history with eco claims. In 2008 it was reprimanded by the Advertising Standards Agency after a national press ad claimed that an easyJet plane emitted 22 per cent less CO₂ than a rival carrier on the same route. It didn't make clear that the commercial referred to CO₂ per passenger.

A year later the BBC ran a programme, *Britain's Embarrassing Emissions*, calling into question the company's website favourably comparing its planes to hybrid cars.

But let's consider the present. Environmental groups have already weighed in critically. Greenpeace, for example, described the pledge as “a jumbo-sized greenwash”.

“There's no climate leadership in asking someone else somewhere else to pollute less or plant more trees so

you can carry on as before. If easyJet want to do their bit to tackle the climate emergency, they should back a frequent flyer levy that will cut the number of flights and the climate-wrecking emissions they pump out,” said the campaigning organisation’s chief scientist Doug Parr.

Then there’s the fact that the airline was hammered by climate scientists and environmentalists for creating the shortest mainland UK flight from Birmingham to Edinburgh (250 miles), which was described as a “pointless waste of carbon” earlier this year.

The real killer for me, however, is the numbers. EasyJet says it’s going to spend £25m on this next year. That corresponds to about 25p per passenger. By comparison, Stelios Haji-Ioannou is paid an average of 16p per passenger by the airline for the use of the “easy” brand. Meanwhile, it generated £6.4bn in revenue and made £424m in profit before tax, despite 2019 being a down year. The airline (crucially) spent £1.42bn on fuel.

Lundgren says the business faced a choice – whether to do something or nothing. This, he says, is the result. That £25m is the cost of offsetting its current carbon output. He also told me offsetting is “scientifically proven”.

PR, or maybe greenspinning, is also a proven method of increasing business by trying to make passengers feel better about flying on your planes. Just saying.

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CEO Johan Lundgren says the airline had to do something (Tim Anderson)