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Climate-Change Scorecard Aims to Influence Consumers

By CLAUDIA H. DEUTSCH

Coke or Pepsi? McDonald's or Burger King? Amazon or Yahoo?

Climate Counts, a new nonprofit group, wants consumers to think about more than taste or service when they make those decisions. It wants them to consider the companies' records in adding to or curbing climate change.

In a scorecard to be released today, the group will rank 56 consumer companies, grouped by industry, on how they measure greenhouse gas emissions, their plans to reduce them, their support or opposition to regulation and — most important, says Wood Turner, the group's executive director — how fully they disclose those activities.

"If the information is not in the consumers' hands, they can't make informed choices," Mr. Turner said.

Gary Hirshberg, chief executive of the yogurt maker Stonyfield Farm and the chairman of Climate Counts, put it in simpler terms: "Companies don't tend to be humble," he said. "When they are doing something good, they usually talk about it."

The Carbon Disclosure Project has ranked companies on their environmental track records for several years. But its goals are to help investors choose stocks and to prod recalcitrant managers. Climate Counts is aiming at consumers.

"It is time for consumers to look at broad-based strategies on climate change, rather than just the environmental impacts of specific products," said Adam Markham, executive director of the nonprofit group Clean Air-Cool Planet and a member of the Climate Counts board.

No company achieved a perfect 100. Six companies scored zero, and only four — Canon, Nike, Unilever and I.B.M. — scored 70 or better. Even Stonyfield Farm, which provided \$500,000 in seed money for Climate Counts, managed only a 63, and its parent company, Groupe Danone, scored 50.

"We got low points on disclosure, and we haven't done enough with renewables," Mr. Hirshberg said with an embarrassed laugh, noting that he has set up teams to solve those problems.

Climate Counts will put the scores on its Web site, climatecounts.org, which it expects to be in operation by noon today. Consumers will also be able to use wireless devices like cellphones to call up a company's score while they are shopping.

Not surprisingly, companies that outranked their direct competitors say they welcome the scrutiny.

Coca-Cola, which scored 57 to PepsiCo's 26, has been tracking, disclosing and curbing emissions for several years, said Jeff Seabright, Coca-Cola's vice president for environment and water resources. It is currently investing heavily in research into more climate-friendly refrigerants, he said.

"Data shows that environment is an increasing part of informed consumer choice," he said, "and this score recognizes our

leadership.”

McDonald's, whose 22 was second only to the 46 scored by Starbucks in the food services category, is similarly pleased. Bob Langert, McDonald's vice president for corporate social responsibility, said that last year the company reduced energy use in its domestic restaurants by 4 percent, and that it will soon rank its own suppliers on their environmental activities.

“It would be terrific if the Climate Counts scorecard triggers consumers to learn more about what we are doing,” Mr. Langert said.

Companies with low relative scores are not nearly as positive about the review. Amazon.com scored zero because the Climate Counts researchers could not find relevant data about its role in climate change. Craig Berman, an Amazon.com spokesman, says they did not look very hard. The company's Web site includes data about its recycling programs, he pointed out, and highlights the green products it sells.

“We have plenty of stuff out there, and even more that we are working on,” Mr. Berman said. “So I just don't know how they are judging us.”

Avon Products, whose score of 11 was dwarfed by the 45 of L'Oréal and the 53 of Procter & Gamble, would not comment directly on the scores. But Susan Arnot Heaney, Avon's director of corporate responsibility, enumerated strides that Avon had made in energy conservation, recycling and packaging reduction.

Avon has been “quietly doing the right thing vis-à-vis the environment,” she said.

The Climate Counts people say they will happily update the scoreboard when companies make more information public. And they intend to issue a new one each year.

“This scorecard serves as carrot and stick, rewarding some companies and prodding others,” Mr. Hirshberg said. “We're not telling consumers who to buy from. We're just telling them to pay attention.”

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