

In an age when Corporate Social Responsibility reports are becoming the norm, there is still an industry that plays its cards close to the chest. While it contributes to 40 percent of CO2 emissions in the United States, it churns out ads designed to soothe the fears of consumers. Even if consumers see through this, they have little-to-no choice but to buy its product. What is this dirty industry? Energy.

Power companies get to choose their energy mix, and then force-feed it to consumers who have no choice but to pay their bills. It's a rare family that can afford to pay \$20,000 up front for solar panels or a personal windmill. And currently, that energy mix is weighted down heavily—with coal.

As it stands now, coal supplies half of America's power, compared to 2 percent from wind power, and 0.5 percent from solar power. The rest comes largely from natural gas, nuclear and hydroelectric. Of these, coal produces the most CO2 per unit of energy. Finally, it's the most abundant energy resource in the U.S. with vast reserves that could last 200 more years—so it's no surprise that the energy industry leans heavily on coal. So in response to the green movement, the industry has turned to clean coal technology development to be the face of the green energy future. The question is: Is clean coal really clean, or is it just a marketing gimmick, designed to greenwash over the black and confuse even the environmentally-savviest of consumers?

The debate is heated. On one side is the *Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity* (CCCE). Its stance is this: With coal producing half of U.S. energy output, and ever-growing energy demand, how can we not use coal?

On the other side is activist group *This is Reality*, which debunks the CCCE's claims that clean coal is environmentally friendly and are quick to point out that the technology has not yet been implemented

in the U.S. In their view, clean coal is a fabricated slogan, used to confuse and mollify consumers so that energy companies can continue to pollute.

And according to a recent g-Think survey, the slogans seem to be working. Half of *Awakening Consumers* have never heard of clean coal. Half think coal is important to U.S. energy policy. And yet 62 percent don't think clean coal is the solution to our emission problems. That's some serious confusion.

Clean coal technology is a process that siphons off the carbon produced by burning coal, liquefies it and stores it underground or beneath the ocean floor. In theory, the technology would make coal just as clean as any other power source. The process, however, would require enormous infrastructure investments. Some estimates say that in order to store just a fraction of siphoned carbon, the entire infrastructure of the U.S. petroleum industry would have to be replicated. And just the process of capturing the carbon itself could consume up to half the energy coal generates.

However, some experts say that renewable energy resources simply cannot meet the growing U.S. energy demand. Perhaps clean coal is the only hope.

To sum up these arguments: We can't live with it; we can't live without it.

So what can the Awakening Consumer do? After all, the average Joe has very little personal contact with the coal industry. Unlike with food, transportation, or household goods, consumers can't vote with their dollars.

...Or can they? More than 70 percent of *Awakening Consumers* are somewhat or very willing to pay more for renewable energy. One option they have is to see if the local power company offers green

energy as an option. At a time when investment for renewable energy has fallen off, this can be a real way consumers can play a part in their energy future, if they can afford the price tag.

We looked at forty of the biggest electricity suppliers to see what they offer. Half do not have any way for consumers to choose renewable energy, and do not include renewables in their portfolio. Of those who do offer the option of green energy, it is often buried deep within their Web sites, and the price per month varies from cheap to astronomical.

*Tuscon Electric Power Co.* offers renewable energy right on its home page for \$2 a month and up. *PacifiCorp* charges \$1.95 for a 100 kW block. With an average household consuming 1000 kWh a month, that amounts to about \$19.50 a month to do a full offset. Then there is *Austin Energy*, which charges 8 cents per kWh. That's \$80 a month on top of the regular bill. The biggest difference between the plans of *PacifiCorp* and *Austin Energy* is that while the former lets you choose an affordable amount to contribute, the latter locks you in to a huge price once you opt in.

It's clear that power companies, for the most part, rely on the ignorance and apathy of consumers who have no idea what options are available, and whether or not these options are fair. It seems that where we need the most information, the most honesty, and the most debate, we're getting the least. All we seem to be getting are slogans. And a lot of dirty coal.