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When Green Gets Sleazy

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Something called the Little Green Book showed up in my e-mail box the other day. It's a very creative viral marketing piece from Morgan Stanley that allows friends to pass on 50 things that any household can do to "make life greener and help tackle climate change."

Unfortunately, this well-done and helpful book is also a good example of the threat to real action on climate change. As long as we have the illusion of easy answers, we can avoid taking on the hard ones.

What you don't know unless you do a quick search of Morgan Stanley and CO2 is that in 2007, the company was one of the lead banks, along with Citigroup and Merrill Lynch, in a proposed project by the energy company TXU to build 11 coal-fired plants in Texas. The project came under sharp and wide attack from Texans, neighboring states, environmental groups and others.

The problem: even though they were new plants, they would use old technology -- burning cheap, but dirty pulverized coal that would put 78 million tons of CO2 a year into the atmosphere -- not to mention mercury and assorted other unpleasant byproducts of coal combustion.

Environmental Defense, by all accounts a practical and collaborative environmental group, offered some perspective. The added CO2 output from those 11 plants would match the total for Sweden, Denmark and Portugal combined. It would be like putting 10 million Cadillac Escalades on the road, or cutting and burning all the trees in a forest the size of California.

The 11 plants were cut to three, but only as an environmental incentive to allow completion of a private equity buy-out. That leaves one to ponder how eight of the 11 plants that TXU argued were essential to meeting demand could so easily be thrown over the side.

As one part of Morgan Stanley was funding a project that would produce CO2 at a rate 2.6 times the total benefit of California's hard-fought greenhouse gas reduction program,

another part was creating a booklet that said the answer to climate change is shorter showers, recycled plastic bags and using bicycles for local errands.

This is bad news for our children.

Truly dealing with climate change is going to ask a lot of Americans -- even giving up our fuel-chugging land cruisers, toasty room temperatures and other perks of a nation that grew up on cheap energy and assumptions that our planet could take whatever we dish out. It's going to ask a lot of people in developing countries who rightly aspire to how we live.

Sacrifice and hypocrisy are a bad mix in the cause of change.

There is evidence that for a number of companies painting themselves green, the base coat is disturbingly thin. They appear to be following that time-tested script for avoiding change that hurts profits: deny it, delay it, dilute it, do it, market it.

An environmental marketing company recently surveyed six big-box retailers and found 1,000 consumer items that made 1,700 environmental claims. Every one of them had at least one hidden trade off, unproven generalization, irrelevant statement or outright fabrication.

The auto makers are moving quickly to give us better hybrids and new electric cars, but still fund an army of lobbyists to fight emission and mileage standards.

Celebrities have done a great job of building consensus. But they tear it down again when a rock star flies 10,000 miles on a private jet with a staff of 20 to pick up an environmental award.

Big change cries out for big leadership. People are being asked to alter their lives and downsize their expectations in return for uncertain benefits that won't even appear until many of us are gone.

If there is a hint that the color green is just a thin veneer of marketing and misdirection, commitment will falter, change will fail, and the future will pay.