

The "Six Sins of Greenwashing"

How to Pick the Truly Green from the Merely Greenwashed

Only one in 1,018 North American products claiming to be green and environmentally sensitive backed up their claims in a satisfactory way, according to a study by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing, Inc.

Before you get too upset, remember to take the news with a grain of salt. The team producing the results is in the business of marketing green products under its own label, the EcoLogo.

Still, the results outline six general principles — what it calls Greenwashing Sins — that can help consumers choose wisely in the marketplace. TerraChoice eliminated any product that "sinned" one or more times. Consumers might find that a product that "sins" very little is the best choice.

1. Sin of the Hidden Trade-off

A product that emphasizes its responsibility in one area may be causing environmental destruction in another. The example TerraChoice emphasizes is paper, which may be derived from wood that is sustainably harvested, but use excessive chlorine in the paper-making process, or fail to use recycled content.

2. Sin of No Proof

The claim may sound great, but if there isn't proof in the form of detailed information on labels or company Web sites, or in the form of reputable third-party verification, there's no way for a consumer to assess the veracity of the statement.

3. Sin of Vagueness

Many terms are used widely but unregulated. Unless a product defines what it means by terms like "nontoxic," "all-natural," "chemical-free," "environmentally friendly" or "earth-friendly," it's possible those terms are meaningless.

4. Sin of Irrelevance

If a product makes a claim that is irrelevant to the product, or that applies to every product in a certain category, it says nothing about how green that product

is. For example, chlorofluorocarbons have been banned for years, so a label touting a product as "CFC free" makes an irrelevant claim, since all of its competitors could make the same claim.

5. Sin of Fibbing


Products should meet the claims on their labels. Those labeled "organic" or with a third-party certification seal can be checked against lists available from the certifier.

6. Sin of the Lesser of Two Evils

Labeling a environmentally toxic product, like a pesticide or a cigarette, as a greener alternative is deceptive since the product is still fundamentally poisonous.

As you can see, it's difficult to meet the standard set by TerraChoice. Consumers can use these guidelines to help them choose well.

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