

Beware of false green advertising campaigns

February 15, 2011

More and more people are making an effort to live environmentally responsible lives. Some make hard core choices such as swearing off fossil fuels and their derivatives, wearing only clothing of natural organic fiber, following a vegan diet and living off-grid.

The main stream course of action is taking place in the marketplace. Many consumers are making buying choices with the environment in mind. There is very little personal sacrifice in purchasing products that claim to be good for the environment, and doing so will perhaps ease one's conscience a bit.

Unfortunately a product or service marketed as being good for the environment is often accepted as such without question. The boys in marketing have figured out that whether a product is "green" or not, making that claim will help to sell it. This practice has become so widespread that it has its own name. Greenwashing is defined as the dissemination of a false or misleading picture of environmental friendliness to conceal or obscure damaging activities.

A recent study by TerraChoice, a division of UL laboratories, found that 95.6 per cent of products surveyed made at least one misleading green claim. Even more disturbing is the fact that 100 per cent of children's toys were in fact touched by greenwashing. While some of these claims are minor, in some cases they border on

fraud. There are very few reputable organizations in the business of certifying products as green. In Canada we have EcoLogo and in the USA there is the Green Seal group. In order to display one of these labels, products must meet rigid standards and undergo a thorough evaluation.

Rather than submit their products to any proper evaluation, many manufactures will download a green label from the internet and slap it on their product. Indeed over 30 per cent of the products in the TerraChoice study carried such labels. This false labeling will usually be supported by an equally dishonest advertising campaign.

The one good bit of news contained in the study was that there is a steady increase in the number of products with proven accurate green claims. This trend is expected to continue.

In the mean time consumers who are conscientious about green shopping can do a few things to ensure that they are in fact buying environmentally friendly products. If a claim is made that a product is certified green look into the organization that issued the label to ensure that it is reputable. Shop for products that are durable as opposed to disposable. Look for products made from sustainable natural sources.

In many cases common sense should prevail. A look at some of the products that have been promoted as green is rather

remarkable. There have been disposable diapers marketed as "pure and natural" when in fact they are composed of undisclosed content, and do not compost in the landfill. There has also been paper plates portrayed as "eco-friendly biodegradable tableware." Corn based ethanol is another product portrayed as green. In fact growing this fuel consumes an outrageous amount of land and energy, and drives up the price of cornmeal in developing countries. But let's face it, even if you are burning 10 per cent biofuel in your Hummer, are you really being green?