

## Some companies greenwash in effort to clean up

By Julie Deardorff

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These days, going green seemingly is a breeze: Pesticides, SUVs, laptops, bottled water, coal, airlines, cruise ships and dry cleaners all promise that they're "friendly," "gentle" and "kind to the planet."

Unfortunately, there probably is no such thing as an "eco-friendly" product, because all use resources to create some amount of waste. Environmentalists argue ad infinitum about what "green" really means. And though the Federal Trade Commission is supposed to crack down on fraudulent advertising, critics say the agency hasn't kept pace with the burgeoning number of misleading environmental claims.

The result is that consumers are often flooded by greenwash, the practice of disingenuously spinning a product, service or policy as greener than it actually is. Think whitewashing with an eco-brush. One environmental marketing firm, TerraChoice, found some form of greenwashing in 98 percent of the 2,219 products in the U.S. and Canada with environmental claims that it surveyed.

But since no one really knows what "green" means — and marketers have relatively outdated FTC guidelines — consumers are left to sort out which green companies are the real deal.

"The good news is that consumers are taking environmental performance into account when making buying decisions," said Howard Learner, executive director of the Chicago-based Environmental Law and Policy Center, which is starting to look at which wireless service providers might be truly green. "But if people pay good green dollars to get green performance, the environmental results should justify the investment."

Even if you haven't heard the term "greenwashing," which originally referred to hotels making inconsequential environmental changes, you've likely seen it.

A well-known example is the bottled water company that uses a picture of Mother Nature to advertise its product. Greenwashing could be a "biodegradable" label on a product that ends up in a landfill, where it won't decompose. At its worst, greenwashing is outright fraud: In February the FTC warned 78 retailers, including Walmart, Target and Kmart, to stop labeling and advertising rayon textile products as "bamboo," which is considered an environmentally friendly fiber.

Fearing that "green" will end up as meaningless as "natural," marketers, environmentalists and business alliances are sponsoring anti-greenwashing conferences across the nation. At the University of Oregon, journalism professors have helped create a tool called "The Greenwashing Index," an initiative designed to draw attention to issues with environmental messages.

The FTC, meanwhile, is expected to release revised environmental marketing guidelines, called The Green Guides, later this year, which some hope will signal the start of a greenwashing crackdown. When the guides were last updated in 1998, terms such as "sustainable" and "carbon neutral" were rarely used.

"Greenwashing is confusing to consumers; it takes away business from reputable companies and, most of all, it delays change," said Marilyn Jones, the owner of Consolidated Printing Company in Chicago, which uses natural alternatives to conventional printing chemicals. "Why would a dry cleaner or printer become green if they can lie about doing it?"

Though greenwashing is prevalent in all industries, it's especially controversial in the dry cleaning world, where companies are scrambling to find alternatives to the hazardous chemical perchloroethylene, or perc, which is classified as a "likely" human carcinogen by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Though about 90 percent of cleaners still use perc, it's increasingly common to see "Eco-friendly" posters hanging in a dry cleaner's window. Meanwhile, many cleaners who have switched to a perc alternative called hydrocarbon technology are now advertising themselves as green, said Peter Sinsheimer, executive director of the UCLA Sustainable Technology and Policy Program.

Hydrocarbon may pose fewer known hazards than perc, but "hydrocarbon machines emit VOCs (volatile organic compounds) that are smog-forming and are greenhouse gases. They create hazardous waste, they are energy intensive, and they are combustible," said Sinsheimer, who created the Environmental Garment Care Commercialization Project to identify environmentally benign alternative processes for dry cleaning.

A Chicago-area discount dry cleaning chain, DryClean Direct, which uses the hydrocarbon technology, proclaims "We're the Green Cleaners!" The company recycles hangers, uses biodegradable plastic bags and calls its petroleum-based solvent "environmentally friendly."

"Save Money, Save the Planet," the company urges.

DryClean Direct's "greenness" rubs Noam Frankel the wrong way. In 1994, Frankel's company, the Greener Cleaner, became the nation's first professional garment-cleaning service to use modern professional wet cleaning. Unlike hydrocarbon, wet cleaning

is truly chemical-free, it doesn't create VOC emission or waste, is energy efficient and non-combustible.

But Frankel worries that companies like DryClean Direct are clouding the issue and making it hard for consumers to figure out what green cleaning really is. "If a chemical company is recycling paper, are they green?" Frankel asked. "The core process of what you do needs to be sustainable, not the peripheral things you do to market yourself as green."

DryClean Direct CEO Yale Gordon has a different perspective. "It's different views on green," he said. "Some folks say you're only green if you're wet cleaning. But you need to look at the entire business rather than an isolated component."

These differing philosophies show that "green is a continuum" said Scot Case, vice president of TerraChoice. "Consumers need to understand there is no finish line. The wet cleaner is focused on the most significant impacts. Recycling coat hangers is a nice step, but when you focus the consumer's attention on one or two minor improvements, you hide a bunch of the environmental hazards."

Case calls this the "sin of the hidden trade-off" because it often works to distract consumers from the larger environmental issues.

"Greenwashing is often committed by well-intentioned people asking the wrong questions," said Case, taking a break from

meetings during the Green Products Round Table in Boca Raton, Fla., a conference held to address greenwashing. "They're exaggerating the environmental benefits or perhaps not asking themselves the right questions about how to improve the environmental service."

Consumers, who generally find energy and car companies as the worst greenwashers, can protect themselves by asking their own questions, said Kim Sheehan, a journalism professor at the University of Oregon and co-creator of the Greenwashing Index.

"If a company uses green colors, trees, leaves, any type of nature symbol, dig a little deeper to see if they can back up their 'eco-friendliness,'" Sheehan said.

### **How to avoid greenwashing:**

**Watch for the sneaky six.** The following six words: eco, earth, green, friendly, gentle or kind. They can be mixed and matched to create a phrase that sounds green but means nothing, said Kim Sheehan, co-creator of the Greenwashing Index.

**Look for third-party certifying seals.** Since there are more than 350 different eco-seals, you have to look carefully. EcoLogo, Green Seal, Energy Star and WaterSense are all considered trustworthy. Also look for the Forest Stewardship Council, the FTC, Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) and U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC).

**Use Google.** Though far from scientific, try Googling the company name plus the word "environment" and see what pops up. "If

consumers or environmental advocates have a beef with the company's track record, something's bound to pop up," according to the Greenwashing Index Web site.

**Know TerraChoice's "Seven Sins of Greenwashing."** These include the "sin of no proof" (tissues that claim various percentages of post-consumer recycled content without providing evidence), "the sin of vagueness" ("all-natural" isn't necessarily green since poisonous substances such as arsenic and mercury are also "natural"), the "sin of irrelevance" (a product labeled CFC-free doesn't mean much since CFCs are banned by law) and the "sin of lesser of two evils" (the fuel efficient sport-utility vehicle).