

Avoid the marketing misuse of 'green'

By Shaila Wunderlich Tribune reporter

Organic cotton sheets, sustainable flooring, recycled glass countertops. The words hint at something lovely and healthy, but what do they mean exactly?

Much like the word "organic" was used loosely years ago, the word "green" and all its synonyms are appearing everywhere in commercials, advertisements and marketing lingo. Its misuse has become so widespread, it has earned its own term —

"greenwashing" — and the Federal Trade Commission has sped up plans to regulate the marketer's tactics. The FTC's final report (known as the "Green Guides") may take more than a year to be finalized. In the meantime, here are some guidelines to get you over the hump.

1). Do your homework. The "do your homework" mandate can seem cliché at times, but it is truer than ever in this instance. "A quick search on the Internet can usually turn up a few reputable editorial sources and most likely some readers comments and ratings," says Graham Hill. Hill's Web site, *Tree Hugger.com*, features its own "Green Guides" section, which breaks down the top environmental attributes and concerns among major product categories, such as lighting, electronics and gardening. More homework guidelines: Confirm green claims through a secondary source, and try to conduct at least part of your research over the phone or in person. "Ask sales reps about the various options they offer, and then drill down with specific questions," Hill says. (What kinds of questions, you ask? See No. 2.)

2). Energy at least. Ask about a product's greenness according to its energy consumption. "Most green problems come back to energy use," Hill says. How to evaluate a product's energy story? Hill says to question the distance a product must be shipped, and whether it is made with the least energy-intensive materials, contains the least number of chemicals and is made with the least amount of materials.

3). Get the story. "Look for companies that have an authentic story to tell, something of substance," says Sara Snow. Snow, host of the Discovery Networks' "Get Fresh with Sara Snow" and a lifelong follower of the green lifestyle, specifically seeks out products that are made by family-run businesses, community cooperatives and other groups that share her personal values.

4). Look for labels. Some day, home goods will have the equivalent of the food industry's "USDA Organic" label — a single stamp or designation that clearly verifies a product's claim. For now, you must rely on the industry's mixed (but trusted) designations, such as: Energy Star, GREENGUARD, Sustainable Furniture Council (SFC), Fair Trade-Certified, WaterSense, Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), etc.

5). Transparent equals true. If a product's ingredients or story are confusing, vague or missing all together, its claims may not be legitimate. In its recent study of 1,018 green products, environmental marketing firm TerraChoice found the "sin of vagueness" to be rampant. Rather than settling with slippery marketing words such as "eco-friendly" or "green," stick with the facts, such as ingredients, manufacturing processes and company history.