

TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL

Beware the Greenwash

By Carl Duivenvoorden

May 17, 2010

One of the earliest cautions most of us learn about spending money is buyer beware: if it's too good to be true, it probably is not true.

That advice is likely more valid today than ever: it's impossible to avoid persuasive ads offering products with unimaginable features and benefits.

But amid the soundbytes and elevator pitches, there's a new hazard today's savvy buyer needs to watch for: the greenwash.

Green business

There are few trends hotter today than going green. Consumers everywhere are realizing the virtues of living more sustainably, and we are starting to factor that preference into our purchasing decisions.

The business world is scrambling to respond. After all, it's becoming clear sustainability presents an enormous opportunity for the other kind of green too. From cleansers to cars, consumers are being offered new, greener choices.

Generally speaking, that's good for the planet - but things are not always as they seem. For just as products we buy often don't seem to perform as well at home as they did on TV, products advertised as green often

aren't quite as eco-friendly as they claim to be.

Hence the emergence of a new term, the greenwash. A greenwash is a claim about environmental sustainability that is false, misleading, overstated or otherwise incorrect.

Common practice

It may sound unethical, but greenwashing is a lot more common than most would guess. In a recent survey of more than 2,200 North American consumer products, TerraChoice Environmental Marketing found that an astonishing 98 per cent were guilty of greenwashing. Categories most prone to greenwashing were cosmetics, cleaning products, toys and baby products.

It all underlines why consumers are right to scrutinize claims of eco-friendliness when they shop.

The seven sins

But how do you sniff out a greenwash? According to TerraChoice, here are the Seven Sins of greenwashing:

1. The sin of the hidden trade off: occurs when a product claims to be greener in one respect, but in the process has gotten less eco-friendly in another respect. An example

would be a cleaning product that is now chlorine-free, but instead has other toxic ingredients.

2. The sin of no proof: perhaps the oldest sin of advertisers, this occurs when a claim is made for which there is no evidence - such as a paper product that claims to contain recycled material, but can't provide any proof.

3. The sin of vagueness: involves the use of terms that may look and sound good but have no real substance to them. "Chemical free?" Pretty tough in a world where everything - ourselves included - is made of chemicals. "All-natural?" So are mold, mercury and many other common toxins.

4. The sin of irrelevance: occurs when claims are made about benefits that are required by law anyway. An example might be a gas retailer boasting about offering lead-free gas, since all gas in Canada must be lead-free.

5. The sin of the lesser of two evils: happens when green claims are made about a product that is dangerous in the first place. Think organic cigarettes.

6. The sin of fibbing: out-and-out lies on the label. Yes, they still happen!

7. The sin of worshipping false labels: the use of images and seals on a product's label to give the impression of a third-party endorsement or a certification when none exists. Consumers increasingly seek and trust third-party approvals on product labels, but manufacturers sometimes mimic the look by creating official-looking seals to promote their own in-house programs.

For more about greenwashing, visit <http://tinyurl.com/bewarethegreenwash>.

Buyer beware

Green consumers, take note. Examine products, read labels, research manufacturers and question vendors before you buy. Be a touch suspicious and a touch sceptical, because things are often not quite as they seem. Beware the greenwash!