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Green Life: Certified green - by whom?

By Monique Beaudin

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MONTREAL - Anyone who shops will have noticed that the number of "green" products has skyrocketed in the past couple of years.

But a new study has found that nearly all of them are guilty of some kind of greenwashing -fudging the truth to make the product sound more environmentally friendly than it actually is.

For the third year in a row, volunteers with Terrachoice, an Ottawa-based company that specializes in environmental marketing, visited Canadian and U.S. large chain stores, specialty retailers and green boutiques. They checked the labels on nearly 6,000 products, ranging from toys to tissues to building materials.

Their conclusion: The number of "green" products available in stores jumped 73 per cent between 2009 and 2010, but more than 95 per cent were guilty of some kind of greenwashing.

This includes not providing proof of the claims made on the label, making false claims, putting fake logos on labels to imply the product has been independently certified, and being overly vague -for example, using the words "all natural," which doesn't necessarily mean a product is environmentally friendly, on a label.



A recent study examining how well products lived up to their green labels and campaigns praised Rona. Photograph by: Marie-France Coalliler, The Gazette

Most of the greenwashing was exaggeration or overstatement of claims, said Terrachoice's president, Scott McDougall.

The study found enormous growth in the number of "green" products at big stores -in three chains, a jump of more than 500 per cent since 2009. In addition, big-box stores are more likely to carry products that are certified as environmentally friendly by a third-party organization, such as Green Seal or EcoLogo. McDougall said that's because the big stores have a lot of influence over their suppliers, so they can ask for greener products. And because they want to avoid controversy, large companies ensure their suppliers can back up the claims on their labels.

One company singled out in the Terrachoice study as a leader was the Quebec company Rona, which operates 700 hardware and renovation stores across Canada. Rona has introduced a line of more than 400 environmentally friendly products, and adopted a life-cycle analysis program for its products, which means that the environmental impact of their products is assessed from their raw materials to disposal or recycling at the end of their useful lives.

Terrachoice paid special attention this year to home and family-related products in its study because, McDougall said, those are fast-growing sectors where people can frequently bring a "green" perspective to their purchases.

The company found that all green toys, and nearly all baby products, were guilty of some kind of greenwashing, but McDougall said that wasn't surprising. It is a new category of products, and so companies are more likely to make mistakes, he said.

"We're optimistic, though, because it seems to get better with time as long as consumers keep up the pressure and continue to reward them for making these innovations in the first place," McDougall said.

Despite the results of this year's study, McDougall said consumers should not turn their backs on green products.

"The right thing for consumers to do is, first and foremost, keep supporting those products that are making a green claim. That's the message to send to the marketplace -that we want more green products," McDougall said. "Even when there is greenwashing involved, the odds are you are getting a product that in some way is greener than it used to be -it's just not as

green as it claims to be. The most important thing is that consumers not give up."

That being said, Terrachoice does have this advice for how to avoid being tricked by false claims:

- * Look for products that have been certified by third-party organizations by checking for logos such as EcoLogo, Green Seal, Fair Trade Certified, GREENGUARD and Rainforest Alliance.

- * Many product categories don't have certified products. In those cases, McDougall said, it's best to look for the "greenest" one - the one that has the most information on its label and that offers resources on its website or customer-service hotline.

"The problem is we don't go into the stores as studious academics with all the time in the world to make rational decisions," McDougall said. "We go in with kids in tow or late for our next appointment, and we make them in fleeting moments. The simple message is choose more information over less, and you'll be supporting greener products and sending the message that more transparency is better than less."

The Montreal-based company Ethiquette certifies sustainable companies. You can check out a list of its recommended green products, many of which are produced in Quebec, at www.ethiquette.ca.

New guide to the 3 Rs in Montreal: The city of Montreal has published a new guide to reducing, reusing and recycling. It has tips about reducing consumption -try asking yourself if you actually need or just want something that you're about to buy. There's also a good explanation of home composting, and lists of what can and

cannot be put in recycling bins. Copies are available at Acces Montreal offices, libraries and Eco-quartiers. Visit the Green Life blog (montrealgazette.com/greenlife) for a link to the online version.