

How not to get greenwashed

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In 2008 Jennifer Nolan and Sheldon Durstling, concerned about the chemicals they were exposing their family to, started researching. The realization they came to was disturbing: even the bathroom products they believed were green – those claiming to be “all natural” or featuring environmental labeling – weren’t that green at all. “There is a void in the market for bathroom products that are truly organic,” says Ms. Nolan, who is a registered nurse. “There are a lot of products that have one or two organic ingredients and the rest is all chemicals.”

So one night Ms. Nolan and Mr. Durstling tried to make a bath bomb using only organic ingredients. The project was a success, and last year the Edmonton couple launched Truffula Products, which strives to use 100 per cent organic ingredients. One of their biggest challenges? “Ensuring the validity of the organics,” explains Mr. Durstling. “Making sure it actually is certified organic.”

Ms. Nolan and Mr. Durstling’s difficulties assessing ingredients is a challenge plaguing all environment-conscious shoppers. Picture this: the busy consumer, big on intentions but short on time, stands in a grocery store aisle staring confusedly at shelves lined with products, from baby food to toilet cleaner, that all claim to be the greenest option. Lacking the time to carefully read each label,

the busy consumer selects a product that seems to be genuine and hopes for the best. Sound familiar?

The number of products making environmental claims on the shelves of major retailers grew by nearly 80 per cent between 2007 and 2008, according to a 2009 report by the environmental marketing firm TerraChoice. At the same time, the use of eco-labels – those small logos that read “environmentally friendly” or “organic” – has doubled. While the increased availability of green products is surely positive, consumers are facing information-overload as they attempt to distinguish truly green products from those that are making dubious claims.



“The rate of ‘greenwashing’ is rampant,” says TerraChoice CEO Scott McDougall, explaining that greenwashing occurs whenever a product misleads consumers in regard to its environmental practices. “Almost all of the sins of greenwashing are problems of exaggeration and

overstatement. They almost all start with a fundamental truth then commit an error of overzealousness." According to TerraChoice's report titled "The Seven Sins of Greenwashing," more than 98 per cent of the 2,219 green products surveyed committed at least one sin, ranging from failing to provide proof to making outright false statements.

Mr. McDougall says that making vague claims is among the most common of sins. Phrases like "all natural" and "environmentally friendly" are often poorly defined. Some products mislead consumers by highlighting one true claim while ignoring other serious environmental impacts, such as beauty products that emphasize the natural ingredient shea butter although the rest of the product is chemical.

False green claims are most common in children's toys, cosmetics and cleaning products. Mr. McDougall uses a baby pacifier as an example. "This product claims to be BPA-free and parents should be concerned about that. But on the package I am not offered any evidence that helps me believe that claim. On the product website, I am not offered any further information. Even if I call the 1-800 number, they have no proof."

Yet, despite all these questionable claims Mr. McDougall doesn't want consumers to be discouraged in their quest to shop responsibly, and he believes it's possible for the average consumer to find items they trust. He recommends using eco-labels.

While some eco-labels are little more than extensions of corporate marketing departments, many labels offer assurances about a product. "The best labels are credible, third-party, independent bodies,"

says Trevor Bowden, co-founder of Big Room, which publishes a website that profiles over 400 eco-labels. He says many certification bodies rigorously investigate products before labeling them. "Look for a label you can trust," he advises. "Labels can be a shortcut to making green choices without researching every product."

Because responsible shopping is a complex issue, consumers need to identify the issues that most concern them before searching out eco-labels that suit them. "A lot of it comes down to priorities," says Mr. Bowden. "Do you want to reduce your carbon footprint? Reduce toxins in your products? Support socially-responsible companies?"

Luckily, while the number of green products in stores increases, resources to help consumers make responsible choices are also continually born. Mr. Bowden's website ecolabelling.org offers a behind-the-scenes look at how specific eco-labels evaluate products. For a more open-source model, the newly launched ethicalocean.com allows users to shop by ethic (eco-friendly, fairly-traded, organic, animal-friendly etc), comment and rate products.

In the absence of eco-labels, there are other signs that a product's claims are credible. "Look for an invitation to visit a website to learn more," Mr. McDougall says. "There is probably more information provided there so that product is probably more into transparency than a competing product." Avoid products that make vague claims without explanation. Be wary of products with excessive green-coloured packaging that lacks details on their environmental practices.

If all else fails and you find yourself in the position of the busy consumer, overwhelmed

by the myriad of green choices in the supermarket aisle and growing skeptical of environmental claims, don't give up, says Mr. McDougall. "Every time you make an ethical choice the markets hear that choice. It's better to support those products that greenwash than nothing at all because it sends a signal to the market place that you prefer products that are trying – even if falsely – to be green."

"The world has never known an engine for change as powerful as the free market."