

EarthTimes

Greenwash: Beyond the False Claim

May 25, 2010

To put it simply, the consumer product industry struggles to effectively and clearly communicate information on its alternative product offerings and business sustainability actions. With sustainability concepts and definitions still subject to interpretation, the same business sustainability eco actions claimed as 'green' are also subject to 'greenwash' commentary.

Consumers are quickly realizing that greenwash is more than just making false claims about products. The fact is that greenwash is far more prevalent than one would expect. In a study by Terrachoice Environmental Marketing, Greenwashing Report 2009: The Seven Sins of Greenwashing, over 98% of the 2,219 products surveyed in North America committed at least one of the following actions:

- False Labels – Some marketers are exploiting consumers' demand for third-party certification by creating fake labels or false suggestions of third-party endorsement. Example: 'eco-safe', 'eco-secure', and 'eco-preferred'.
- Hidden Trade-off – Suggesting a product is 'green' based on an unreasonably narrow

set of attributes without attention to other important environmental issues. Example: Paper from a sustainably-harvested forest. Other important environmental issues in the paper-making process, including energy, greenhouse gas emissions, and water and air pollution, may be equally or more significant.

- No Proof – An environmental claim that cannot be substantiated by easily accessible supporting information or by a reliable third-party certification. Example: Percentages of post-consumer recycled content.
- Vagueness – A poorly defined or broad claim that its real meaning is likely to be misunderstood by the consumer. Example: 'All-natural'
- Irrelevance – Making an environmental claim that may be truthful but is unimportant or unhelpful for consumers seeking environmentally preferable products. Example: 'CFC-free', even though CFCs are banned by law.
- Lesser of Two Evils – Claim that may be true within the product category, but that risk distracting the consumer from the greater environmental impacts of the category as a

whole. Example: Organic cigarettes.

- Fibbing – Making environmental claims that are simply false. Example: Falsely claiming to be Energy Star certified or registered.