



Report: 'Green' product claims are often misleading

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More than 95% of consumer products marketed as "green," including all toys surveyed, make misleading or inaccurate claims, says a report today.

The number of products claiming to be green increased 73% since 2009, according to a survey by TerraChoice, an Ottawa-based marketing firm owned mostly by Underwriters Laboratory of Canada. The UL network does independent product testing and certification.

"The biggest sin is making claims without any proof," says Scot Case of UL Environment, adding that companies want consumers to "just trust them." The report finds "vagueness" is the second-leading problem (a shampoo claimed it was "mother-earth approved") in "greenwashing" – a term that refers to misleading, false or unproved green claims.

The report comes as the Federal Trade Commission is proposing stricter advertising rules. In updating its Green Guides, last revised in 1998, it warns companies not to make blanket claims such as "eco-friendly" or cite unqualified certifications (a paper towel product once claimed it "fights global warming.")

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"Consumers should look for more specificity," says James Kohm of FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection. He says general claims are difficult to prove.

For its "Sins of Greenwashing" report, TerraChoice visited 34 stores in the U.S. and Canada from March to May and surveyed 5,296 products that make environmental claims. The products included toys, baby care items, building materials,

housewares, consumer electronics and health goods.

make fewer misleading claims than those such as toys and baby products that are new to it.



Dawn Josephson, a mother of two children, tries to buy only products that are friendly to the environment. She showcases her collection April 16 in her home in Jacksonville, Fla.

By Jake Roth, for USA TODAY

"Those in the environmental space for a while are learning from their mistakes," Case says.

The report shows progress, however slight, is occurring, says Thomas Lyon, director of the Erb Institute for Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan.

Still, he says the growing green marketplace is tricky for consumers. "There are all these fake labels," Lyon says. "You still have to do your homework."

The report finds that 30.9% of the products surveyed had fake labels, whereas 67.3% had vague claims and 70.1% made claims without proof. It notes there are many legitimate third-party green certifiers including EcoLogo, Fair Trade Certified, FSC (Forest Stewardship Council), Green Guard, Green Seal, Rainforest Alliance, UL Environment, Water Sense and USDA Organic.

A skyrocketing share of products claim to be free of phthalates, chemicals used to make plastics, and BPA or bisphenol A, an estrogen-like chemical.

The report also found:

- A small but rising share of products make accurate green claims— 4.5% this year, up from 2% in 2009 and 1% in 2007, when the first survey was done.
- "Big box" retailers are more apt to sell products with accurate claims than boutique stores. They may have more influence on their suppliers, Case says.
- Products such as building materials and office goods that have more experience in the green marketplace