

Study Finds Greenwashing Affects 98% of Cleaning Products

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Your eyes aren't deceiving you, but the labels might be. There are more products claiming to be Green these days; however those 'all-natural' and 'organic' products are likely committing at least one of the Seven Sins of Greenwashing, by not telling the complete truth. Between 2007 and 2009, the in-store availability of so-called 'Green' products has increased between 40% and 176%, with 98% of products surveyed still committing at least one Sin of Greenwashing, according to a report on the Seven Sins of Greenwashing recently released by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing.

Greenwashing is defined as the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service. For example, claims of 'biodegradability' were found on 124 (or 42.5%) general cleaning products studied. If a verification source was not provided, these types of claims were deemed vague and misleading. Other claims such as 'natural' and 'non-toxic' appeared on 97 (33% of) and 61 (21% of) cleaning products, respectively. In absence of specific explanations, these terms could also mislead purchasers.

Greenwashing is also changing in creative ways. As a result, a new sin has been identified and added to the original 2007 Six Sins of Greenwashing. The 'Sin of Worshiping False Labels' means that some marketers are mimicking third-party environmental certifications on their products to entice consumers to buy. The full report and handy consumer tips can be found at: www.sinsofgreenwashing.org.

"The good news is that the growing availability of Green products shows that purchasers are demanding more environmentally responsible choices, and that marketers and manufacturers are listening", said Scot Case, Vice President of TerraChoice. "The bad news is that TerraChoice's survey of 335 cleaning products in the U.S. and Canada shows that 98% committed at least one Sin of Greenwashing and that some marketers are exploiting the demand for third-party certification by creating fake labels or false suggestions of third-party endorsement. Despite the number of legitimate eco-labels out there, buyers will still have to remain vigilant in their Green purchasing decisions."

The Seven Sins of Greenwashing, from most common to least common, are:

- The Sin of the Hidden Trade-Off occurs when one environmental issue is emphasized at the expense of potentially more serious concerns. In other words, when marketing hides a trade-off between environmental issues. 100% recycled paper towels, for example, are not necessarily environmentally preferable just because they contain recycled content.
- The Sin of No Proof happens when environmental assertions are not backed up by evidence or third-party certification. One common example is 'chlorine-free' bleach that claims to be better for the environment without providing any supporting details.
- The Sin of Vagueness occurs when a marketing claim is so lacking in specifics as to be meaningless. 'All-natural' is an example of this Sin. Arsenic, uranium, mercury and formaldehyde are all naturally occurring, and poisonous. "All natural" isn't necessarily Green.

- The (new) Sin of Worshiping False Labels is when marketers create a false suggestion or certification-like image to mislead consumers into thinking that a product has been through a legitimate Green certification process. One example of this Sin is a paper towel product that uses a certification-like image to make the bold statement: "this product fights global warming."
- The Sin of Irrelevance arises when an environmental issue unrelated to the product is emphasized. One example is the claim that a disinfectant spray is 'CFC-free', since CFCs are banned by law.
- The Sin of Lesser of Two Evils occurs when an environmental claim makes consumers feel 'Green' about a product category that is itself lacking in environmental benefits. Air fresheners are an example of this Sin.
- The Sin of Fibbing is when environmental claims are outright false. One common example is products falsely claiming to be Energy Star certified.

The 2009 Seven Sins of Greenwashing Report focused on cleaning products, children's toys, baby products, and cosmetics, because these product categories are the most susceptible to Greenwashing. Cleaning products are also of particular concern to schools, hospitals, offices and other commercial buildings as they have made connections between indoor air quality, chronic illnesses (such as asthma) and cleaning products. As a result, the number of cleaning products claiming to be Green has risen.

"Other important news is that eco-labeling is on the rise," added Case. "Legitimate eco-labeling is nearly twice as common as it was in our 2007 survey, increasing from 13.7% to 23.4% on all Green products. The 2009 Seven Sins of Greenwashing report demonstrates that purchasers do have Greener choices in products but that they need to recognize the legitimate labels and ask questions of unfamiliar ones."

About the Study

In November 2008 through January 2009, TerraChoice researchers were sent into category-leading 'big box' retailers in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia with instructions to record every product making an environmental claim. For each, the researchers recorded product details, claim(s) details, any supporting information, and any explanatory detail or offers of additional information or support.

In the United States and Canada, a total of 335 Green cleaning products - classified as either cleaners or paper products - were recorded. Of the 2,219 products recorded, 4,996 Green claims were made. These claims were tested against best practices, notably against guidelines provided by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, Canadian Competition Bureau, Australian Consumer and Competition Commission, and the ISO 14021 standard for environmental labeling.

About TerraChoice Environmental Marketing

As North America's premier environmental marketing firm, TerraChoice Environmental Marketing helps grow the world's most sustainable companies. TerraChoice's consulting practice converts knowledge of environmental science, markets and marketing into winning, client-centered solutions to help sustainability leaders deliver results. For more information, visit www.terrachoice.com.

To download a copy of the 2009 Seven Sins of Greenwashing Report, or to view some handy tools, go to: www.sinsofgreenwashing.org.



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