



Greenwashing Away Our Future

By Matt Power

April 2010

Imagine that you're about to get remarried for the third time. But there's a snag. Your wife's family are devout fundamentalists who insist that only someone "pure of heart" can marry their daughter. They suggest that you to be tested by the Grand Poobah of the church, on issues of honesty, financial management and piety. But instead, you decide to write your own test, and have one of your employees tally your score. Having passed with flying colors, you show up on the wedding day wearing a blazing white polyester suit of purity. So why do the inlaws still look unhappy?

This story illustrates how some manufacturers have "embraced" the green revolution. They don't like the third party certification program, so they make up their own. Result: Their weak green labeling means to consumers. The latest edition of a study called "Seven Sins of Greenwashing" from Terrachoice lists some common examples of how product makers use marketing ploys to corrupt the green message.

- In the United States, there is a brand of aluminum foil with certification-like images that bear the name of the company's own in-house environmental program without further explanation.



- In Canada, one paper towel product uses a certification-like image to make the bold (if vague statement) 'this product fights global warming'.

- Several brands of air fresheners give the impression of certification of the claim 'CFC-free' (thereby committing both the Sin of Worshipping False Labels and the Sin of Irrelevance)

From: Terrachoice.com

(<http://www.terrachoice.com/Home/News>)

The same thing is happening in the building industry. For example, I read recently about Sherwin Williams' decision to create its own paint certification instead of conforming to GreenGuard standards. I can't say I'm surprised. I remember visiting SW's booth at the Builder's Show a few years ago, where I grilled them about a new line of washable paints they had developed for kids' bedrooms. At a time when other manufacturers such as Glidden, Mythic Paints and Benjamin Moore were introducing low-VOC products, SW's personnel shrugged at the concept, saying they were

mainly concerned about performance. Now they want to play in the sandbox with the other green kids, but make their own rules. Is their product really green? It's tough to tell. That's one of the problems with private labeling. Each company uses its own mathematical formulas.

In fairness to Sherwin Williams, we contacted GreenGuard and found out that they do certify several brands under the GreenGuard program, and staff has likely changed since that visit a few years ago. I'd welcome comment from them about why they chose to go the self-certification route with these new products.

Advertising spending on so-called green products is way, way up. But it's often meaningless. As I reported in a previous story, for example, Whole Foods has a tremendous reputation as a "green" company. In reality it's no more green than Rite Aid.

The news is not all bad, however. Terrachoice says that a reckoning may be imminent. They note that Ecolabelling.org estimates that more than 300 watchdog groups have formed. Increasingly sophisticated, they're not likely to be fooled by green colored brochures, logos that look like certifications, and fast-talking sales reps.