



# The Seven Deadly Sins of Greenwashing

May 8, 2009

Mark Spaulding

Is it really a surprise that 98% of products are guilty of "[greenwashing](#)"? Short of a whole boatload of new government regulation, what's to stop sly marketers from pulling the "Eco Wool" over the eyes of consumers? Nothing, really.



[TerraChoice Environmental Marketing](#) defines "greenwashing" as the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental and/or sustainability practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service. For instance, "natural" was found on products in the UK ranging from toys and baby care items to health and beauty aids. If unexplained and unsupported, "natural" can mean different things to different consumers.

TerraChoice recently released its **Seven Sins of Greenwashing** report, finding that 98% of products surveyed in the UK committed at least one Sin of Greenwashing. The full report and handy consumer tips can be found at [www.sinsofgreenwashing.org](http://www.sinsofgreenwashing.org)

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

- 1. 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. Paper, for example, is not necessarily environmentally-preferable just because it comes from a sustainably-harvested forest.
- 2. The Sin of No Proof** happens when environmental assertions are not backed up by evidence or third-party certification. One common example is facial tissue products that claim various percentages of post-consumer recycled content without providing any supporting details.
- 3. 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'.

**4. The 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 whose packaging has a certification-like image that makes the bold claim that the product 'fights global warming.'

**5. The Sin of Irrelevance** arises when an environmental issue unrelated to the product is emphasized. One example is the claim that a product is 'CFC-free', since CFCs are banned by law.

**6. 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. Organic cigarettes are an example of this Sin.

**7. The Sin of Fibbing** is when environmental claims are outright false. One common example is products falsely claiming to be Energy Star certified.

Fortunately, in the midst of all this, legitimate eco-labeling is nearly twice as common as it was two years ago, increasing from 13.7% to 23.4% on all 'green' products," according to TerraChoice.

*Art courtesy of TerraChoice Environmental Marketing*

---

**Follow me on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/CnvCurmudgeon](http://www.twitter.com/CnvCurmudgeon).**

Sign up for a Twitter account so I can follow you.

Posted by [Mark Spaulding](#) on May 8, 2009 | [Comments \(1\)](#)

Industries: [Flexible Packaging](#), [Label & Narrow Web](#), [Package Printing](#), [Paperboard/Cartons](#), [Sustainability](#)