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In the Green

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Towels touted as “eco-friendly.” Cleaners noted as “natural.” A pest-control company glad to call itself “green.” In many cases, these claims are accurate, as the products or services benefit or don’t harm the environment. But sometimes, companies can be guilty of greenwashing—misleading consumers about the environmental benefits of a product or service or about eco-friendly practices of a company.

Studies done in 2007 and 2009 on the environmental claims of products found in big-box stores helped Canada-based TerraChoice Environmental Marketing come up with its “Seven Sins of Greenwashing,” including the sins of having no proof (a claim that can’t be substantiated) and of vagueness (a claim that’s poorly defined or so broad that consumers are likely to misunderstand its real meaning).

Jennifer Languell, president of Fort Myers-based Trifecta Construction Solutions and a member of the task force for Discovery Channel’s Discovery Project Earth, has definitely seen instances of greenwashing increase as more companies jump on the eco-bandwagon. Some stem from a lack of education, she says, not from malicious

intent.

One problem is that many of the green buzzwords—and the word “green,” for that matter—lack specific, standard definitions. “If I asked you to define ‘green’ and you asked me, neither one of us would say the same thing,” she says. “When someone says ‘natural’ to me, in my brain I picture a field of daisies, blue skies, a breeze. But uranium is natural, radon and formaldehyde are natural. That’s the biggest challenge we’re facing with greenwashing, that we all kind of have our own definitions.”

Companies need to be aware of the repercussions of greenwashing, which could range from losing customers to action from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). Last year, the FTC sued several companies for allegedly selling products labeled or advertised as “bamboo” that were really made of rayon, and it warned 78 more retailers this year about the same issue.

“Anything you do that’s green deserves to be highlighted,” says Suzanne Dameron, CEO/president of Sarasota-based Aspire Public Relations, which specializes in green branding and social marketing. “But what

you need to be careful of is not taking that one thing you're doing that's green, which is very good, and then amplifying it to making yourself a green business. If you have one green product, it does not make you a green business."

Obtaining certification from a reputable third-party source, such as Energy Star, Green Seal or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED), is one way for companies to back up their green claims. "Certification saves a lot of time," says Dameron. "Once you've got that certification, you're justified in what you say."

But even those seals of approval don't always tell the whole story, says Cloe Waterfield, owner of Naples-based Twentyfifty, which helps municipalities, businesses, and homeowners assess their environmental footprint and minimize resource use. Take the LEED certification, for example. "You can do things to make the project or building fit the right boxes, but everyone could be driving to work in a Hummer," she says. "Just because you strap a certification on something doesn't mean it's all OK. It's not always black and white; you have to use your own judgment."

And those well-respected credentials aren't always foolproof. A recent investigation by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that the Energy Star program is vulnerable to fraud and abuse, after the GAO obtained Energy Star certifications for 15 bogus products, including a gas-powered

alarm

clock.

Consumers have to do some legwork when making decisions about green products and services. "To me, the most important thing is buyer beware," says Languell. "Do your research. If what you're looking to buy has a third-party certification, do some research on that certification and make sure it's not Bob's House of Logos that made the pretty little label. Make sure there's some sort of validity to the agency or organization doing the certification."

And be aware of clever marketing tactics. "Don't be deceived just because the product has white and green packaging," says Elizabeth Goldsmith, a professor in the College of Human Sciences at Florida State University and author of *Green Cleaning for Dummies*. "Read a little deeper." If a cleaning product that claims to be eco-friendly lists its ingredients and it's easy to understand what those ingredients are, that's a good sign.

The bottom line is: Don't take things at face value. "You have to read the fine print, and not believe everything you read," says Waterfield.