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## **Attention shoppers: beware of false eco-claims**

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More consumer products are claiming to be environmentally responsible, but nearly all of them make at least one claim that is unverifiable, according to a study released Wednesday.

TerraChoice, an environmental marketing agency with offices in Ottawa and Philadelphia, says more than 98 per cent of the products it surveyed committed at least one of the "seven sins of greenwashing."

"The good news is that the growing availability of green products shows that consumers are demanding more environmentally responsible choices, and that marketers and manufacturers are listening," TerraChoice president Scott McDougall said in a release.

"The bad news is ... that some marketers are exploiting consumers' demand for third-party certification by creating fake labels or false suggestions of third-party endorsement."

The company, which got similar results with its 2007 survey, sent researchers to big box retailers in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia with instructions to record every product making an environmental claim. The survey ran from November 2008 through January 2009.

In the United States and Canada, a total of 2,219 "green" products were recorded.

The claims made on the products were tested 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.

"We focused on children's toys, baby products, cosmetics, and cleaning products, because these product categories are the most susceptible to greenwashing and are of particular concern to consumers," said McDougall.

One of the most common "sins" was with respect to one environmental issue being emphasized at the expense of potentially more serious concerns.

Paper, for example, is not necessarily preferable just because it comes from a sustainably-harvested forest.

There are other important environmental issues involved in making paper products, such as the energy needed to create them, greenhouse gas emissions and water and air pollution. These problems may in fact be more environmentally-destructive than harvesting from a non-sustainable forest.

And organically grown cotton may be good for the environment, but not if the cotton was bleached with chlorine.

The survey also found environmental assertions that weren't backed up by evidence or third-party certification. One common example is facial tissues that claim various percentages of post-consumer recycled content without providing any supporting details.

Researchers also took aim at marketing claims so lacking in specifics as to be meaningless — "all-natural" for example. "Arsenic, uranium, mercury, and formaldehyde are all naturally occurring, and poisonous," the report states.

Perhaps the most serious claim, however, had to do with false labeling.

"Some marketers are exploiting consumers' 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, consumers will still have to remain vigilant in their green purchasing decisions," said TerraChoice president Scott McDougall.

Researchers discovered a paper towel product whose packaging has a certification-like image that claims the product "fights global warming."

The company urged consumers to look for legitimate third-party certification on products, such as EcoLogo, EnergyStar, Forest Stewardship Council and EcoCert.

TerraChoice manages the federal government's EcoLogo program.