

NOT SO GREEN AFTER ALL

AN ASTONISHING NUMBER OF SO-CALLED eco-friendly products make claims they can't back up. The practice is so common it has a name: greenwashing

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THE GAZETTE

Madeleine Bird picks up a big, green bag of cat litter: "Environment friendly product," proclaims the label. This litter, it says, is biodegradable, compostable and works naturally.

"Even the cat is green," Bird notes of the illustration on the bag. "It makes you think your cat is an environmentally friendly cat."

Bird, who promotes sustainable household products in her work as an environmental health consultant, is prowling local supermarket aisles to assess "green" wares.

From chlorine-free toilet bowl cleaners to hybrid cars, eco-friendly products are popping up everywhere.

You can lather your hair with "chemical-free" shampoo that asserts it was not tested on animals, don bamboo underwear and an organic cotton T-shirt, and use your energy-efficient printer to create a letter on recycled paper with non-toxic ink.

But if buying Earth-friendly products gives you a warm and fuzzy feeling, consider this:

An astounding 99.9 per cent of so-called green products make false, misleading or unsubstantiated claims, according to a study last year by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing.

Companies have become so adept at making themselves and their products look more environmentally friendly than they really are, the practice has its own name: greenwashing.

Natural.
Non-toxic.
Chemical-free.
Biodegradable.

They sound good. But what do they mean? "Anybody can go ahead and make that claim for their product and nobody has to verify that claim at all," says Urvashi Rangan, senior scientist and policy analyst for the Consumers Union in Yonkers, N.Y., publisher of Consumer Reports magazine.

"Frankly, the vaguer it sounds, the less you should rely on it."

TerraChoice investigated 1,018 "green" products sold in U.S. big-box stores and found all but one — paper towel made by a Quebec company, Cascades — make unsubstantiated, misleading or false claims.

"The results were so shocking, we wanted to make sure they were accurate," says TerraChoice vice-president Scot Case. TerraChoice administers Environment Canada's EcoLogo program. There are more than 7,000 EcoLogo-certified products from hundreds of manufacturers. For information, visit www.ecologo.org.



1 ALL NATURAL Many poisons, including arsenic, uranium, mercury, and formaldehyde are all-natural.

2 GREEN SCHMEEN Terms like "green," "environmentally friendly," and "eco-conscious" are meaningless without elaboration.

3 NON-TOXIC, NOT USEFUL Everything is toxic in sufficient dosage. Water, oxygen and salt are all potentially hazardous.

4 CHLORINE-FREE, BUT...? Even so, it could contain other environmentally damaging ingredients such as eye irritants, skin irritants and actual or suspected carcinogens.

5 CHEMICAL-FREE Nothing is free of chemicals. Water is a chemical. All plants, animals, and humans are made of chemicals, as are all man-made products.

6 CFC-FREE? WE HOPE SO CFCs have been illegal since the 1970s.

7 NOT IF YOU TOSS IT Biodegradable is a meaningless claim if the product will end up in the garbage, where it can take decades to degrade. It's only biodegradable if you compost it yourself.

8 RECYCLABLE, BUT WHERE? An empty claim if local facilities to recycle this container do not exist. Also meaningless if you toss the product or container in the garbage.

9 HOUSE LOGOS Is this logo from a recognized certifier or is it simply a house brand design that doesn't mean the product meets independent standards?

10 LOOP CONFUSION! A dark mobius loop on a light background means a product can be recycled where facilities exist. But most consumers think it indicates recycled content.

11 INGREDIENTS There's no way of knowing if a product is truly green without a list of ingredients.

GREENWASH 'Every which way you turn, something is getting greener'

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"What shocked me the most is I did not think there would be such a high percentage of greenwashing," says Case. "I actually thought our staff had done something wrong."

TerraChoice came up with the "six sins of greenwashing" to describe the most common false and misleading claims made by products (see story on Page H2).

They include:

Paper products that boast of recycled content but do not reveal harmful impacts like water pollution from the bleaching process or greenhouse gases from manufacturing.

Electronic products that trumpet their energy efficiency but contain harmful substances such as mercury, cadmium and brominated flame retardants.

Hairspray, insect repellent and shaving cream that boast they are "CFC-free" and "ozone-safe," even though chlorofluorocarbons have been illegal since the 1970s.

Shampoos and soaps that claim to be organic but provide no certification or supporting information to back up that claim.

Once a niche market for the environmentally committed, green products have gone mainstream.

"Every which way you turn, something is getting greener," says Gwynne Rogers, a business director at the Natural Marketing Institute, a U.S. market research company specializing in health, wellness and the environment.

Clorox is among the latest corporate giants to wade into the eco-marketplace with its Green Works line of cleaning products, available in Canada later this month.

About 19 per cent of U.S. consumers say they are committed to buying environmentally friendly products, Rogers says. In 2005, they spent \$209 billion on green goods and services, from compact fluorescent light bulbs to energy-efficient homes, according to the Natural Marketing Institute.

The green market is also booming in Canada, where 70 per cent of consumers say they are willing to spend up to 20 per cent more for environmentally preferable items, says Nancy Wright, vice-president of Vancouver's Globe Foundation, which conducts market research and organizes trade shows for green business.

But as the TerraChoice study shows, shoppers are on their own when it comes to sorting the impostors from the genuinely green.

"One of the challenges facing consumers and companies alike is we don't have definitions for green products and we don't have definitions for green com-



Madeleine Bird knows how to do what most of us don't: spot a suspicious claim on the label of any product. Bird is an environmental health consultant.



Garbage bags with recycled material catch Bird's eye. Read small print for proof. Right: Eco Cert logo from France. It's a good one.



panies," says Joel Makower, executive editor of GreenBiz.com, based in Oakland, Calif.

TerraChoice's Case charges that manufacturers exploit that vacuum by plastering packages with words that sound good but mean little, like natural, chemical-free, biodegradable and recyclable.

Take the recycling symbol on juice bottles and paper products that has a dark "mobius loop" on a light background. What does it mean?

If you guessed recycled content, you're wrong. You're also not alone.

"Marketers have figured out that most consumers do not know the difference between a product that is recyclable and a product made of recycled con-

tent," says Case.

In fact, a dark recycling symbol on a light background simply means the product or container can be recycled *where facilities exist* — a claim Case dismisses as meaningless.

A light symbol on a dark background means the product contains recycled material.

But how much? Is it post-consumer waste or post-industrial waste that was never used by consumers? Without supporting information, the recycled-content logo means little.

Biodegradable is another claim that sounds more green than it really is.

"Most of the time consumers are throwing these products in the garbage and they are going

into landfill. They do not degrade for thousands of years," Case says.

Products like discarded paper often do not degrade for decades in landfills — a major source of methane gas that contributes to global warming.

Most people are unaware of what happens to the garbage they toss, Case points out.

"Marketers take advantage of this uncertainty by suggesting that products disappear in landfill. That's simply not how it works," he says.

"Don't make a purchasing decision based on biodegradable unless you plan to do compost it yourself," Case advises.

Rangan of the Consumers Union warns that terms like

"natural" and "free range" can be misleading.

Meat labelled "natural" might have been treated with antibiotics and a chicken labelled "free range" might never have gone outside, she says. "It just means it had the option of going outside for an unspecified period. It could mean nothing."

Manufacturers often tout juice cocktails, soft drinks, jam and other products as "natural" even though they contain high-fructose corn syrup, a highly processed sugar substitute.

In 2006, the U.S. Centre for Science in the Public Interest threatened to sue Cadbury Schweppes for labelling 7Up as "100 per cent natural" even though it contains the high-fruc-

tose syrup.

The food giant later amended 7Up labels to read "100 per cent natural flavors."

But Stephen Gardner, director of litigation for the non-profit centre, says many other food products that contain the syrup still claim to be natural.

"People want to eat natural foods," says Gardner. "The corporations know it and they slap the natural label on products. They know damn well it isn't."

Last year, yoga-wear chain Lululemon Athletica retracted health claims for garments that contained fibre from seaweed after the New York Times exposed the claims as false.

Labels asserted that vitamins and amino acids in the garments could be absorbed by the skin to reduce stress.

A lab test commissioned by the newspaper showed no significant difference between the seaweed fabric and regular cotton.

Striving towards a greener shopping cart takes research. But becoming an environmentally conscious shopper is a worthwhile exercise, points out TerraChoice's Case.

"It's a way of teaching people that their actions do have environmental consequences," he says. "That kind of education is a prerequisite for a truly sustainable society."