



Stop the Greenwashing

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Green products are proliferating. Great news. Unfortunately so is greenwashing - exaggeration, misrepresentations or just plain lies in green product marketing and branding, which, intentionally or not, conveys false information and impressions.

Here's an example from an unnamed furniture manufacturer. "[Our furniture] is unique because [it] is handcrafted using plant-based renewable, raw, materials which are manufactured using recycled substances that conserve resources thus helping the environment!"

This statement is so vague that it's really meaningless. Permit me to tear it apart:

- All plant-based materials are renewable, some within months, others take decades or even centuries.
- Raw? To be fair I think there may be a misplaced comma here, but aren't all plant-based materials raw?
- Recycled substances come in many forms, not all desirable. They may or may not conserve resources depending on the embodied energy and emissions impacts of the process. Claiming waste reduction would be more legitimate.

- Helping the environment? There's no direct evidence either in the press release or on the manufacturer's website that it is making a positive difference. The furniture is primarily made from cane, rattan and bamboo but no mention of where or how the materials are farmed. On sustainably managed plantations? By workers treated humanely? In Asia?

Sometimes I hear or read this stuff and shudder. For example, one manufacturer recently bragged that its product does not use PCB plastics. Seriously! Polychlorinated biphenyls are highly toxic substances whose production was banned in the United States over thirty years ago. Also, as far as I know, PCB's were never used in plastic. Perhaps the writer was referring to phthalates, an additive to PVC that has come under attack and has been removed from products by multiple manufacturers concerned about its safety.

The manufacturer touted the product's use of ABC plastic. If anyone knows what that is, please let me know. I did a Google and Wikipedia search and couldn't find it. I hope these statements were simply sloppily written without any intent of deceit.

Interior designers and architects are often the liaison between manufacturers and the consumer and, therefore, have two vital functions: guarding against greenwash and writing green specifications.

Sometimes the terms "eco-friendly" and "eco-smart" are bandied about without any basis of fact. That's greenwash and it's often deliberate. The Trade Commission offers some assistance, albeit slowly, with proposed revisions to its Guides. First issued in 1992 to identify and take action against misleading environmental claims by marketers, the changes seek to strengthen the Guides by regulating terms such as "eco-friendly," warn against the use of unqualified certifications or seals of approval and better define certain terms such as degradable or compostable.

Another excellent resource is [Greenwash.com](#), an environmental marketing agency best known for its clever expose of greenwashing and its list of the Sins of Greenwashing.

1. Sins of the Hidden Trade-off - a narrow and incomplete set of attributes
2. Sin of No Proof - unsubstantiated environmental claims
3. Sin of Vagueness - poorly defined or too broad claims; i.e.: "all-natural"
4. Sin of Irrelevance - meaningless claims; i.e.: CFC-free
5. Sin of Lesser of Two Evils - i.e.: organic cigarettes
6. Sin of Fibbing - simply false
7. Sin of Worshipping False Labels - a green impression through words or images where none exists

[Greenwash.com](#) recently expanded on this list by identifying Nine Types of Greenwashing and providing examples of each. My

favorite: "A radiant barrier paint product is advertised as having an incredibly high R-value, but the ad neglects to mention that it only insulates that well when installed on NASA spacecraft that see thousands of degrees of temperature differences."

Designers and specifiers must become greenwashing sleuths. We move forward by outing the perpetrators and at the same time, encouraging greener product innovation and commercialization. The best defense is knowledge and a healthy dose of skepticism.