



New Advertising Code to Crack Down on Greenwash

By Leon Gettler

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Australia's advertising industry is finally cracking down on greenwash, with the Australian Association of National Advertisers publishing an Environmental Claims in Advertising and Marketing Code.

While not saying as much, the Association (AANA) has made it clear that the code is designed to stop advertisers misleading the public with bogus claims about the greenness of their products. In its official statement announcing the code, the AANA said it aims to ensure "marketers apply rigorous, industry-wide standards when they make environmental claims in advertising or marketing communications."

The code, which took two years to develop, spells out very clearly what advertisers can and cannot say in relation to the environment.

It says that claims made about the environment "shall not be misleading or deceptive or be likely to mislead or deceive." Furthermore, the code prohibits these claims from being "vague, ambiguous or unbalanced."

Claims should be "supported by evidence that is current and reflects legislative,

scientific and technological developments", and have to be presented "in a manner that can be clearly understood by the consumer."

Advertisers are prohibited from suggesting the product or service has been endorsed or certified by another organization when it hasn't.

Advertisers will not be allowed to mislead consumers into believing that the company has voluntarily changed its environmental practices when those changes have actually been mandated by law, nor will they be permitted to overstate their claims. They are also prohibited from not running down the importance of any non-environment attributes of a product or service.

Claims not only need to be "substantiated and verifiable", but they also need to have enough detail to allow consumers to evaluate the claim.

The code says: "Substantiation information should be readily accessible, or made available in a timely manner in response to a reasonable written request."

It also says "The use of unqualified general claims of environmental benefit should be

avoided unless supported by a high level of substantiation or associated with a legitimate connection to an authoritative source."

"This code of practice establishes a clear framework for advertisers and marketers on the use of 'green' claims and sets the benchmark against which these claims will be judged," said AANA chief executive officer Scott McLellan.

"It gives consumers a simple, transparent mechanism to assess the environmental merits of a product or service, and provides the means for them to easily make a complaint in the event that they believe they've been misled by an environmental claim."

The code is significant in the face of evidence showing that greenwashing is becoming a real problem in Australia. In June, a survey into green marketing conducted by environmental marketing firm TerraChoice found almost all products carrying environment-friendly claims were guilty of greenwashing.

According to TerraChoice, the greenwashing advertisers were guilty of a number of 'sins' including the "sin of no proof", where they made claims unsupported by third-party verification. Other greenwashing sins included vagueness, irrelevance (for example aerosol claiming to be CFC-free when CFCs are no longer used in aerosols) and worshipping false labels (for example, having a frog or rainforest on a label to suggest the product has some sort of green certification).

According to TerraChoice, toys, baby products, cosmetics and cleaning products were the most susceptible to greenwashing.