



Green Glossary: Greenwashing

June 14, 2010

By Jennifer

I talk my head off about greenwashing here at Growing a Green Family and yet I recently realized that I've failed to define it. That might be helpful, right?

Greenwashing is an extremely complicated topic, depending on who you ask. There are die-hard examples of greenwashing I can point out but many people tend to choose their own definition based on their eco-comfort zone. Some people are way more flexible on the issue than others.



Greenwashing Index notes that greenwashing is, "When a company or

organization spends more time and money claiming to be "green" through advertising and marketing than actually implementing business practices that minimize environmental impact." WisegEEK says, "Greenwashing is a marketing technique in which a company falsely claims environmental responsibility."

The above are typical and decent definitions of greenwashing but like all issues there are shades of gray; or well, green in this case. This is where greenwashing gets tricky.

SHADES OF GREEN

Past sins of a company: If a company has been an eco-baddie in the past, but it's trying to be better, are they green or just greenwashing? It's a popular debate among greenies. I'm not as unforgiving as some. If a company is trying to make smart green changes I'll give them the benefit of the doubt and start researching what they're doing to see if it lines up with my idea of eco-friendly.

New sins of a company: Say a company works hard to provide eco-friendly products to consumers. Say this company offers full disclosure and honest green goods. Now say that this company sells out to a large

corporation who isn't so green. One example is Sprig, who I adore and who was also recently purchased by Wham-O, a not so eco-friendly company. On one hand because of the buy-out, Wham-O is now producing some better quality, even eco-friendly gear. On the other hand is Sprig now guilty of guilt by association and does it mean Wham-O is greenwashing by taking on a token green product line (see below)? I'm on the fence. I like privately owned green companies best, but that's not the way business always works out. With situations like this I take it on a case by case basis.

MAJOR contradictions: While I'll forgive a small company who sells out (sometimes) and while I can forgive past mistakes, I will never ever be on board with companies who outright contradict eco-friendly products or services. Some people don't mind. Take the Clorox Greenworks line, which BTW is actually eco-friendly. Some people are like, "You go Clorox! Awesome job getting green!" Um, no. A company who manufactures a massive amount of toxic bleach and chemical products as their mainstay while turning out a token green product is 100% greenwashing in my opinion. If a company can make some products that are eco-friendly and work, why not go all the way green?

Sort of green products: A company's goals and sustainability statements do matter, but what eco-friendly really comes down to is how the company actually runs their show and the products they create. Some companies toss words like "natural, green, organic," and more around but can't entirely back it up. For example, a company may produce soap that is non-toxic and organic but then package it in plastic. The soap could be ok with some natural ingredients but also contain preservatives and fake

colors. To know if a company is greenwashing or not by product standards it's smart to have some green product criteria in place.

THE SINS OF GREENWASHING



If you're looking to avoid greenwashing or trying to understand greenwashing better then TerraChoice is one of the best resources around. TerraChoice is a science based environmental marketing agency. Their goal is to help truly sustainable companies grow and to help consumers look out for greenwashing.

TerraChoice is the organization behind the **Seven Sins of Greenwashing**. Which is an awesome resource but actually I have one problem with it – they don't disclose all their info. I sort of get it. They note, "TerraChoice has decided not to reveal the names of the products in the study. The main purpose of the study is to help educate consumers and marketers about avoiding the pitfalls of greenwashing. Providing the names of select products, when there are thousands more on the market, doesn't provide the answers." That's all well and good but when one of your seven sins is labeled, "Sin of Vagueness" and when people against greenwashing often consider a lack of disclosure a negative, well... I'm just saying.

The sins are still a good resource though and are as follows...

The seven sins:

1. **Sin of the hidden trade-off:** Such as sustainable wood that must be transported hundreds of miles – that's a big eco trade-off.
2. **Sin of no proof:** People promoting green with no evidence to back it up.
3. **Sin of vagueness:** Using terms without explaining them. There are few certifications in place for green products, so any old company can say, "We're eco-friendly" but with no definition to back it up well... they could be anything.
4. **Sin of worshipping false labels:** When a product that, through either words or images, gives the impression of third-party endorsement where no such endorsement exists; fake labels, in other words.
5. **Sin of irrelevance:** This is when a company makes "So what claims" like saying they don't put a harmful chemical in their cosmetics that hasn't been used in any cosmetics for years.
6. **Sin of fibbing:** Claiming false green certification.
7. **Sin of the lesser of two evils:** This, in my opinion is the biggest sin of greenwashing companies, because this is when a company actually tries to make you feel better about doing less than you could. This also leads to people mis-thinking that they're doing their best so they may not try to do better. Lame.

HOW MUCH GREENWASHING IS GOING ON?

A surprisingly large amount. You have to be hyper diligent and savvy to avoid all greenwashing. An nice piece was posted last year at Sustainable Business; Greenwashing on the Rise. This pretty much a must read if you're interested in how greenwashers are getting more creative with their lame greenwashing efforts. According to the piece, *"Between 2007 and 2009, the in-store availability of so-called 'green' products has increased between 40% and 176%, with 98% of products surveyed still committing at least one Sin of Greenwashing."*

According to TerraChoice, 98% of products are more greenwashed than real green and the most common greenwashing occurs with products such as toys, baby products and cosmetics.

WHY GREENWASHING MATTERS TO YOUR FAMILY



The second you start to try and live in a more eco-friendly manner, greenwashing immediately becomes an issue.

- Green products are already very tricky to navigate and in turn greenwashing makes it harder to

choose the best green goods. Sometimes it's easy to spot greenwashing (Fur Is Green – really?) and sometimes not (Earth Grains).

- Greenwashing is expensive. Why pay more for an item that you think is green, organic or natural only to find out later that you could have paid less for an item that's totally comparable conventionally.
- Greenwashing harms the planet: Greenwashing efforts have the ability to encourage a massive amount of consumers to do the total opposite of what's good for the environment. Like for example, companies who encourage biodegradable diapers as "good for the earth" over cloth diapers or "eco" detergents that still contain chemicals that harm our soil and water supply. Palmolive Eco is a great example of greenwashing. This product is touted as eco-safe yet contains bleach and fake chemical fragrance. Nice.
- Greenwashing halts sales of actual green companies. There are plenty of companies out there who actually care about the environment and human rights related to production. Companies who greenwash are only using green to gain business, not because they care about the issues. However, these greenwashing companies get business from uneducated consumers. AND by uneducated, I'm not totally blaming consumers. Companies who try to trick people make it confusing and it is hard to make smart consumer choices.