

Sustainability Newsletter Week 55: Sept. 1-5, 2008.

Topic: The 6 Sins of Greenwashing



What is greenwashing?

-Greenwashing is the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service.

The 6 Sins of Greenwashing were realized by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc. They conducted a survey of six big box stores and identified 1,018 consumer products bearing 1,753 environmental claims. All but one of the products made claims that were discernibly false or that could mislead consumers. TerraChoice recognized six patterns in greenwashing, and came up with the 6 Sins of Greenwashing.

(Source: <http://www.terrachoice.com/Home/Six%20Sins%20of%20Greenwashing/The%20Six%20Sins>).

1. Sin of the Hidden Trade-off:

- Emphasizing one environmental issue isn't a problem (indeed, it often makes for better communications). The problem arises when hiding a trade-off between environmental issues. The product might be something like paper, which could come from a sustainably harvested forest, but what about the emissions from manufacturing and transportation? Lifecycle costs should be taken into account.

2. Sin of No Proof:

- Many products make a claim, but offer no evidence or certification of this statement. Company websites, third-party certifiers, and toll-free phone numbers are easy and effective means of delivering proof. An example could be personal care products that claim to have not been tested on animals.

3. Sin of Vagueness:

- If the marketing claim doesn't explain itself ("here's what we mean by 'eco' ..."), the claim is vague and meaningless. Watch for some popular vague green terms: "non-toxic", "all-natural", "environmentally-friendly", "chemical-free," and "earth-friendly." An example of a product would be an insecticide claiming to be "chemical-free." Nothing is chemical-free. Water is even a chemical. Therefore, this marketing is vague and misleading.

4. Sin of Irrelevance:

- The Sin of Irrelevance is committed by making an environmental claim that may be truthful but is unimportant and unhelpful for consumers seeking environmentally preferable products. It is

irrelevant and therefore distracts the consumer from finding a truly greener option. The most prevalent Sin of Irrelevance is the “CFC-free” claim. Chlorofluorocarbons in products have been banned for almost 30 years. Ask if the claim is important and relevant to the product. Comparison-shop and ask the competitive vendors.

5. Sin of Fibbing:

- Always ask if the claim is true. The most frequent examples in the study were false uses of third-party certifications. Legitimate third-party certifiers (EcoLogo^{CM}, Chlorine Free Products Association (CFPA), Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), Green Guard, Green Seal, etc.) all keep publicly available lists of certified products. Some even maintain fraud advisories for products that are falsely claiming certification. An example would be a product claiming to be “certified organic” with no actual certified standards.

6. Sin of the Lesser of Two Evils:

- This claim tries to make consumers feel “green” about a product category that is of questionable environmental benefit. For example, consumers concerned about the pollution associated with cigarettes would be better off to quit smoking than to buy organic cigarettes. Likewise, consumers concerned about the human health and environmental risks of excessive use of lawn chemicals might create a bigger environmental benefit by reducing their use than by looking for greener alternatives.

For some more information on green labels and certifications, refer back to Sustainability Newsletter Week 41.