

Dazed and confused

Rampant misuse of 'green' labels on household products misleads eco-conscious consumers

Patrick Langston, The Ottawa Citizen
Saturday, August 9, 2008

Just when you thought buying that household cleaner labelled "green" would help save the planet, think again.

An oft-cited study released last year by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing found that greenwashing -- the practice of making a company or its products look more environmentally friendly than they are -- is rampant.

Of the 1,000-plus green products surveyed in American big-box stores, a jaw-dropping 99.9 per cent made false, misleading or unsubstantiated claims. TerraChoice broke the results into six categories of "sins," including the Sin of the Hidden Trade-off (a chlorine-free bathroom cleaner that contains other toxic materials) and the Sin of Vagueness (a product that claims to be chemical-free when all living things, including humans, are made of chemicals).

You'd think that after decades of television commercials, we'd be savvy to marketers' ploys. Yet a recent study by the market research and consulting firm, SPINS, found that the sale of natural products has surged 26 per cent. And with frightening new evidence of climate change and environmental depredation a seemingly daily event, the trend is likely just achieving liftoff. Especially since almost three out of four Canadians, according to TerraChoice, are willing to spend more to buy environmentally responsible products.

Corn-based biodegradable garbage and other bags are a prime example of greenwashing, says Mark Girvan, manager of Arbour Environmental Shoppe on Bank Street. "They're compostable, not biodegradable," he says.

Put biodegradable bags in the landfill where they are not exposed to the composting action of oxygen, and they won't break down for centuries.

To add to your eco-guilt, consider the soil fatigue caused by monoculture -- in this case, the vast plantations of corn required for countless corn-based products -- and the damage to surrounding bodies of water from fertilizer runoff from those same farm fields. Reusable bags start looking pretty good.

Girvan has no shortage of greenwashing examples. Think of the body lotion labelled 70-per-cent organic, he says. That's fine if it means 70 per cent by volume. However, if it turns out that 70 per cent of the ingredients are organic, but those ingredients account for only 20 per cent of the volume, it's misleading.

It's hard for the consumer, especially when standing in a busy drugstore aisle to get the facts. Ingredients may be listed in order of prominence, but you'd still need to know which ones are organic.

One solution is to look for the EcoLogo stamp. The famous three doves/maple leaf logo identifies more than 7,000 environmentally preferred brands (find them at www.ecologo.org). In some cases -- say, household cleaners -- you can also make your own (www.lesstoxicguide.ca has recipes).

The Canadian Advertising Standards, meanwhile, has issued a heads-up to advertisers that they might expect unwanted attention if they start greenwashing. If a complaint about a vague term, like environmentally friendly were levelled with the organization, says Janet Feasby, vice-president of Standards, "what we would look for is ... the how or in what way."

The advertising standards organization has not received many greenwashing complaints, she adds, but does point out the record number of complaints to Britain's Advertising Standards Authority last year. "Europe is I guess ahead of us in that way."

Recently, the Canadian Standards Association and the Competition Bureau released the self-explanatory *Environmental Claims: A Guide for Industry and Advertisers*. While not legally binding, it does condemn the use of vague claims about environmental benefits and warns that claims be substantiated before winding up on labels.

Available at www.csa.ca, the document also underscores the complexity of eco-labelling. Whether the product is composed of recycled materials is one thing, but what about resources used to produce and transport the item? Life cycle analysis is among the guide's recommendations.

Such broader issues concern Christopher Straka, co-owner of Ottawa's Vert Design, which specializes in residential green planning and design. As he points out, the push is now on for not just greener buildings, but more eco-conscious materials. Problem is, there are so many environmental certifications, Forest Stewardship Council and Green Seal among them, that the consumer is frequently left dazed and confused.

"There's a real glut of them right now," he says. "And each one tends to focus on just one realm."

Straka is awaiting the arrival of the Pharos Project certification, being developed by the Centre for Clean Products and Clean Technologies at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville and the Cascadia Region Green Building Council in Oregon. The certification will evaluate all aspects of a product -- from environmental to social impacts -- when considering certification. It may turn out to be the best companion to LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), whose stamp of approval is based on an overall environmental evaluation of construction projects.

If all this is making your next shopping expedition seem daunting, consider Straka's practical approach to his own profession: "Striving to be green, there are always compromises that have to be made. You can't do everything."