

alive

Has green come clean?

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Two years ago when “eco-friendliness” began stuffing shelves everywhere, alive told readers about greenwash, an emerging marketing trend where corporations were greening up merely by saying so. Researchers had just wiped the sheen from 1,700 green claims in six big box stores and found only a single really clean one.

The Canada/US study was done by TerraChoice, the Ottawa company that awards the EcoLogo certification on behalf of Environment Canada and helps manufacturers market green goods by using audited certifications consumers can rely on. Now TerraChoice has done a new study, apparently with better news.

The better news

Company president Scott McDougall says they found many more “green” products—73 percent more—on the market this time. He thinks it’s a sign that “consumer behaviour is changing the world for the better. Companies are only [going green] because consumers are demanding it.”

But there’s also plenty of bad news in the report and some truly shady stuff going on. In its first study TerraChoice identified six “sins” of greenwashing (where labelling makes irrelevant, vague, or unproven claims; speaks half-truths; or even simply lies). Now the company has had to add a seventh: the Sin of Worshipping False Labels (see sidebar for all seven sins).

The new scams can be brazen. For just a few bucks you can now download fake certification logos, for instance. (But why pay when you can Photoshop your own?) Bigger spenders can find other operators online—check out greenwashersconsulting.com—who’ll be delighted to design customized, comprehensive, and completely dishonest green marketing campaigns.

Greenwash goes BPA-free

And then there are the claims McDougall calls shameful, the ones designed “to play on the immediate fears of consumers. They

go to the hot button issues of the day—like greenhouse gas emissions, like BPA, like phthalate.” (Bisphenol A is an estrogenic ingredient of some plastics. Last year Canada was first worldwide to designate it toxic. Like the EU, we ban it from baby bottles. Phthalate, also in plastics, is probably an endocrine disruptor.)

If corporations are turning out products du jour for ethical reasons rather than for commercial advantage, McDougall asks why we don’t see evidence of it outside sales campaigns. “That,” he says, “would make for truly great marketing.”

The winners, the losers

Of the types of products TerraChoice evaluated, which were winners and which were losers?

Coming in second last, but surely most offensive, were toys and baby things. Every toy label surveyed, and almost every baby label, made unreliable claims. Nearly half the items in the category made BPA- and phthalate-free claims. BPA items shot up 577 percent, phthalate 2,550.

Consumer electronics came in dead last for claims reliability; nothing surveyed had any reliability whatsoever. Perhaps because they’re new to green, Future Shop, Best Buy, et al are full of greenwash and empty of green.

Conversely, companies may improve with practice, so that categories that went “green” earlier—building and office supplies, for instance—are now keeping more promises.

Still, the biggest backslider was tissue (paper towels, toilet paper, facial tissues). But is that

because manufacturers have been greening long enough to make “second wave” claims they haven’t yet thought through?

Consumer-powered green

Teresa Fisher, a Halifax hairstylist we told you about along with TerraChoice’s first study, knows that hairspray is never green at any price. “Salon products are always toxic,” she says. “Natural products don’t work as well in hair. Fragrance-free is a start. But if it does the job, it’s toxic.”

Fisher, now 25 and working at a chic downtown salon, says she’s still trying to find clean green claims in beauty products. It hasn’t been for want of trying—she “lives for product” and has her own great hair to show for it—or for want of choice, either. She has seen the volume spike that TerraChoice tracked, but for her, more contenders mean more pretenders. “Things get bigger, but they don’t change.”

Keep buying green

A shelf in McDougall’s Ottawa office displays what might be called his coal mine canaries—a pair of infant pacifiers. One says it’s “BPA-free,” the other doesn’t, and McDougall says he’d always buy the one making the claim.

For him it’s not about rewarding poseurs; it’s about telling industry you want green. If most greenwashing is exaggeration, not outright falsehood, then “all this greening, at some level, is actual greening. Keep buying green. It’s better than the alternative. It sends a signal.”

But for Fisher? Her new salon’s downtown clients might spend more to shop ethically, but they might also be sick of truthiness.

“People are divided now,” she says. “They feel strongly one way or another. They buy ethically or they couldn’t care less. No one’s in the middle anymore.”

Sorting out certifications

The marketplace has grown greener in the last few years, and plenty of snappy eco-labelling now smiles down on us from store shelves. But not all labels and logos are created equal. Some are downright fiction.

EcoLogo and Green Seal
Audited certifications use logos that consumers can, for the most part, trust. In North America these are EcoLogo and Green Seal (and, for the moment, nothing else).

Both follow the ISO 14024 environmental gold standard, and indisputably good news in the current report is that TerraChoice found them on about 20 percent of the stuff it surveyed this time.

In Canada the Competition Bureau sets unenforced limits on eco-claims. TerraChoice can withdraw its EcoLogo imprimatur from backsliders—but then, as we’ve seen, unscrupulous greenwashers can simply make their own.

Beware of imposters
Legitimate standards can slow down greenwash, but they can’t dry it up. Yes, the good logos have a lot of bad company out there. Consumers can look for other greenmarks, but they should look closely.

Don’t stop at labels and logos, any of them, says Fisher. “Read the ingredients. Look them up. It’s not that hard.” Even standards and marks that seem beyond reproach can be greenwashed. McDougall points out that

products sporting audited marks can be blowhards, claiming more greenness than they’ve been certified for—and sometimes “good” labels aren’t very.

Energy Star
Who knew, for instance, that manufacturers seeking Energy Star certification supply their own efficiency data? Or that last year Energy Star would be caught in a sting for certifying products that didn’t exist and were beyond belief anyway: gas-powered alarm clocks and “air purifiers” built out of space heaters, flypaper, and feather dusters?

Energy Star, dogged by *Consumer Reports* over claims CR’s own labs haven’t been able to duplicate, had already been cited by the US Environmental Protection Agency office of an internal government auditor. Yet it continues to shape the market.

EU’s Ecolabel
Then there’s the European Union’s cherished Ecolabel. Its mark, a winsome blue-green bloom that’s used in all 27 EU countries, was deflowered a year ago for appearing on paper, including two popular brands of office copying paper, made from unsustainable Indonesian rainforest timber. The French eco-labelling agency involved has dodged comment.

Fair Trade
Even Fair Trade chocolate isn’t always fair—not when the cocoa beans come from Ghana and the Ivory Coast, where some harvesters use child labour and some manufacturers look the other way. Ivory Coast produces almost half of our chocolate. Think of that—or try not to—when you reach for your next Cadbury Dairy Milk.

Standardize labelling?

Even green boutiques are getting product labelling wrong compared to big box stores. (TerraChoice speculates that boutiques like the products they know. These may well be eco-friendly, but they aren't certified and don't have audited labelling.)

When even venerable stores and standards fail inspection, the tarnish spreads around. How can consumers sort it all out? McDougall thinks consolidating the standards and certifications will help. Among reliable ones worldwide, he says, there are still too many.

"Always choose the product that seems to be doing its best to offer more information, not less," McDougall advises buyers. "That way, you eventually improve transparency in all products."

Corporate-powered green

TerraChoice directed its first study at savvy consumers. McDougall says the current report speaks to corporate readers inexperienced in how to be green and wanting to learn.

But "corporations do not have ethical positions," says American writer Ginger Strand, who gave a sober second thought to Google's celebrated ethics and greenness around the time TerraChoice first went poking through store shelves.

Writing in *Harper's*, Strand laid bare Google's taste for the taxpayer-subsidized and not-so-clean energy that fires its huge, ever-expanding server farms in the States and, increasingly, abroad.

Lately, Google has more energy-inefficient plans, this time to bring us "cloud computing" that will need even bigger data

centres, more bandwidth, and more power. Google badly wants to seem green, Strand says now.

"The people within Google may have admirable green convictions, but Google itself, like Exxon or Wal-Mart or IBM, is a corporation, which is to say, a machine for making money ... Their [emerging] desire to increase grid efficiency—like their desire to locate data centres near cheap sources of power—is driven by economics, not ethics.

Of course bringing green energy online is a good thing. But a mere increase in our energy capacity is simply going to increase consumption—just as increases in highway miles put more cars on the road."

All the same, TerraChoice—newly joined with Underwriters Laboratories, a large multinational group of companies that test and certify goods of all sorts—is one corporation that doesn't seem to find it hard to help match the interests of consumers to the profit imperative of business, or at least to make these things matter equally.

McDougall says the marriage is just what drives TerraChoice. "It's the value we bring to our corporate customers. They come to us to get it right. We say to them 'we're tree huggers, but on this assignment we're your tree huggers.'"

Conversely, customers drive corporations, and "the market always hears you." On that point, Fisher and TerraChoice agree. "Every dollar," Fisher says, "is a small vote."

TerraChoice's 7 sins		
The	hidden	trade-off
The product has a sliver of green, but what's unsaid? Truly green means green from the		

beginning to the end. CFL light bulbs aren't, nor are "energy-efficient" electronics containing hazardous materials, nor even "100% post-consumer recycled" paper. It's still paper, and it brought down trees.

No proof

Consumers can't certify or even evaluate the eco-promise: cosmetics that claim they aren't tested on animals, for instance. Who says? How do you know?

Vagueness

The eco-promise is meaningless. So what if a cleaner is "all-natural"? Arsenic, uranium, mercury, formaldehyde—they're all-natural, too, and they're lethal poisons. Be skeptical about three-letter buzzwords such as bio- and eco.

Irrelevance

Remember when everything was suddenly labelled "cholesterol-free," whether it ever contained cholesterol or not? Now that trick's gone green. Oven cleaner advertised as CFC-free is trying to dupe you. Everything's CFC-free, and has been for 30 years.

Lesser of two evils

Even green can hide nasty stains. Cigarettes are organic; they're biodegradable too. (And cholesterol-free!) Consider the Hummer hybrid—at one time on the planning blocks at GM but now a no-go following the division's demise.

Fibbing

Some products claim green attributes and even official certifications they simply don't have. In TerraChoice's 2010 study the most common examples were products falsely claiming to be Energy Star certified or registered.

Worshipping false labels

This is TerraChoice's new sin. The green claim is designed to fool you. Most "green" labels and logos exaggerate the eco-friendliness they claim. Scratch some, though, and you'll find there's no green beneath them at all, only fraud.

For more information, visit sinsofgreenwashing.org.