

## Seven sins of greenwashing

By Rory Murray

August 16, 2011

According to TerraChoice Environmental Marketing, in 2009, 98% of all 'green' claims made by companies and brands were guilty of one or more of the 'seven sins of green washing'. These are hidden trade-offs, no proof, vagueness, false labels, irrelevance, lesser of two evils and fibbing.



Source:

The direct dictionary definition of 'green wash' is 'the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service'.

Greenwashing is not a new concept, as consumers have been misled about the environmental benefits of products and services for years, but now there is an ever increasing list of dubious marketing practices. Green is no longer just a colour but has become a movement to make

money.

There is no regulation in South Africa to combat 'green' claims and we believe that a regulatory body is needed to monitor and combat claims. Currently the only association taking strides to assist with this is the Advertising Standards Authority and even then the resultant impact is not entirely useful.

In addition, something needs to be done to police greenwashing in South Africa. Government needs to get on top of standardising and certification processes, business chambers need to set higher standards and the advertising industry should police its members.

Some of South Africa's brands are guilty of greenwashing, with their use of vague claims, such as 'organic' when their products may contain suspicious and harmful chemicals. Other claims include 'environmentally friendly' and even 'eco-safe' when they are not. Consumers should demand the truth, as false claims amount to fraud.

### Recycling

### vagueness

The most common claim in South Africa sits right within the 'vagueness sin' and this is the Mobius loop, the recycling symbol that is

intended to mean that the product is made from recycled material.

This little recycling symbol, found on almost all packaging, does not have a qualifying statement which makes it completely misleading to the consumer. Does it mean the whole product, or that package or both and is it 100% recycled material or less and is it post-consumer waste or pre-consumer waste? Because there is a big difference.

Consumers need to be warned against purchasing products that have these symbols on them. Check the content and how it was recycled, only when a product is recycled from a high content of post-consumer waste does it have any claim to be green, as it actually has an impact on the environment.

There is no label that exists for this type of information, it seems that it is the consumers' responsibility to check the wording on products carefully and make an educated decision, based on limited information.

The only way to tell if a product has a genuine green claim is to audit the entire supply line and not just the end product. In terms of recycled content it is important to analyse the raw material input to see what environmental impact the product actually has and ultimately what they are able to claim.

### **How to spot greenwashing:**

1. Read between the labels - check the wording on packaging carefully. In South Africa the green movement is not yet regulated and therefore there are no certification or green seals for products so manufacturers can do pretty much whatever they want. If a product says natural, yet contains

arsenic, it doesn't necessarily mean it is safe.

2. Use common sense - some companies make green claims when you know that their products are destroying the environment - you need to exercise your right to choose.
3. Be suspicious - don't trust anything unless you have verified it.
4. Look out for buzz words - organic, sustainable development, clean, eco-friendly etc.

Most greenwash is due to ignorance or sloppiness rather than malicious intent. Businesses and advertising agencies can take simple steps to prevent greenwash slipping through. As a consumer, you too can spot the worst greenwash symptoms and make up your own mind.