

Beyond Looking Green

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Most of us will agree that green is in the eye of the beholder and the same can be said of greenwashing. In spite of recent efforts by the FTC and others to create clearer guidelines, there are still no definitive answers of what *is* green and what is *not* green, so both continue to be subject to perspective and debate.

Green Choices Are Rarely Obvious

In packaging, which is just a relatively narrow slice of the overall green world, we often have conversations with customers and clients who are understandably confused about what their green priorities should be. For example, is where a product came from or what it is made of more important than where it will end up?

Recently, after a presentation at a green festival, I was asked, "Which packaging product is better, one that is biodegradable or one that is recyclable?" It was an excellent question and the correct answer of course is both. Ideally a product should be recyclable but in case it winds up in a landfill, which inarguably most of our waste still does, knowing it will break down quickly and safely is a big positive. Fortunately, in many product areas we no longer have to settle for just one disposal option when there

are options offering a variety of end of life cycle alternatives.

Earlier this year I was involved at the International Housewares show which gave me an opportunity to see products from around the world. Some industry people tell me that as much as 95% of what we US consumers buy in this product category is manufactured and packaged overseas.

What I could not help but notice at the show this year is how adept foreign packaging manufacturers have become in duplicating the green look that US consumers are increasingly attracted to. All too often these purchase decisions are based almost exclusively on appearance, making it easy for manufacturers to pretty much get away with anything they want. If there is insufficient green washing regulation domestically, there is virtually none for products being imported.

What is "The Green Look"?

It typically eliminates bright, white bleached surfaces and high gloss finishes on the visible exterior surface. The substrates of choice are usually paperboard or corrugated board in a natural Kraft color and if necessary it is minimally printed using eco friendly plant based inks in soft pastels or

muted colors. In a word, the look is best described as "natural."

In addition, the structural design is intended to minimize board use and maximize product visibility. This has all become the norm for packaging in many circles such as organic skin care, crafts, soy candles or any green product striving to be eco-consistent by utilizing green packaging.

If looking green was sufficient, many of these same companies would not feel obligated to add an eco message. We refer to them as "because we care" statements since in most cases they infer something that is not supported with detail. One of my recent favorites is a toy with the following message appearing next to their company logo and the obligatory recycling symbol: *"To help preserve our natural resources this package is made of recycled paper"*.

Guilty of Multiple Sins?

One of my favorite gauges for the relative greenness of a product claim is Terra Choices' [Seven Sins of Greenwashing](#). The toy manufacturer's statement I mentioned above reminds me of almost any former state of Illinois Governor. It is seldom a question of guilt; the debate almost always centers on the type of charges and the number of counts.

In this case, a strong argument could be made to find the company above guilty of several greenwashing sins but I simply refer to it as *implying greenness with intent to mislead*. The obvious questions are how much recycled paper is being used and what type of recycled content is it? Since no specific claim is made and no proof or support provided, a trusting parent and consumer might choose this toy over a

competitive product that may possibly contain as much or even more recycled content but elected not to paint their package with a broad, green washing brush.

Perhaps it is our job to continue raising awareness and educating each other every chance we have. However, our greatest opportunity to support real sustainability is from our position as consumers. When we are able to see beyond the thin layer of green wash some products are coated with, it will begin to influence our buying decisions and then we will begin to drive significant change.