

Eco-friendly claims create confusion

By Sandy Bauers

August 15, 2011

The grocery store can be so confusing. I'd like to buy greener products, but it's hard to figure which they are.

Is it the "all natural," "entirely natural" or "100 percent natural" food? Poison ivy and salmonella are natural, too.

Is it the "biodegradable" cleaning wipes? The dish soap that proclaims the company "helps save wildlife"? Or the cleaner with three logos: Sierra Club, "Natural Products Association Certified," and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's "Design for the Environment"?

The bad news is that there is no simple, universally recognized label akin to, say, the UL symbol for electrical products that meet safety standards set by Underwriters Laboratories (which, it so happens, recently jumped into the crowded green field with a subsidiary called UL Environment).

The good news is that James Kohm feels my pain.

Starting about 2005, there's been "a tsunami of green claims coming into the marketplace," he said.

Kohm is an enforcement director at the Federal Trade Commission, an agency that is trying to sort all this out.

To be sure, consumers want safer, and greener, products. So marketers are responding. Products are labeled recycled, recyclable, ozone-friendly, nontoxic, and more.

Labels and certifications wear your politics on their sleeves.

A few months ago, the U.S. Department of Agriculture introduced its "BioPreferred" label for products whose ingredients are at least one-quarter renewable plant, animal, marine, or forestry materials.

Looking for products that are manufactured using wind energy? A consortium of companies and groups now has a "WindMade" label.

Bill Daddi has counted 350 green seals - including the one he represents, the Green Seal.

As might be expected, they're not all created equal.

Green Seal is an independent nonprofit that develops standards for sustainability and provides certification.

Some others, he said, are seals that an industry group simply awards to all its members. In an attempt to manage this mess, the FTC publishes "Green Guides" for manufacturers.

The agency doesn't define terms in the way that the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for example, regulates "organic" claims.

The FTC says it simply seeks to prevent consumers from being deceived.

"We look at the way reasonable consumers understand terms," Kohm said. "We're not trying to encourage green products or not."

The Green Guides were first issued in 1992 and updated periodically. This time, the FTC started the process early because of the plethora of green claims, Kohm said.

In October, it formally proposed revisions. Basically, they call for more specificity. General terms like "environmentally friendly" or "eco-friendly" won't fly.

The changes also caution marketers not to use vague, unqualified certifications. "If a seal just says The Green Institute, that is likely . . . going to need some qualification," Kohm said.

The guides also are addressing claims that didn't exist when the previous versions were published - carbon offset and renewable energy claims, for instance.

"It's been a bit of the Wild West until now," Kohm said.

One case in point: In 2009, the FTC charged Kmart Corp. with making false claims that its American Fare paper plates were biodegradable.

The FTC's research shows that consumers commonly think "biodegradable" means the product will simply break down into its natural components within a year after customary disposal.

Except that "the way solid waste is customarily disposed of is in the trash, and the trash generally goes to landfills," which exclude the light, air, and water needed for decomposition, Kohm said.

Kmart withdrew the claim.

The proposed revisions drew a large response, Kohm said - 340 individual comments from all corners of industry, plus 7,000 "form comments," such as petitions. They ranged from the highly technical to the generic.

Environmental Packaging International expressed a worry that some specific words, like recyclable, contributed to a "misperception" about the product's overall environmental benefit.

The Institute of Packaging Professionals didn't think a time limit should be assigned to claims of degradability.

But many welcomed the guidance. Daddi said the revisions would prompt a fundamental change in how green marketing is conducted. (And, just maybe, a reduction in his Green Seal label's competitors.)

"We're hoping for greater standardization," he said. "Hoping there is somewhat of a shakeout of marks that are out there."

The guidelines likely won't be finalized until the end of the year, at the earliest. But companies are already changing practices, Kohm said.

As a concerned, confused shopper, I'll be watching. And hoping.

GREENSPACE: HOW TO READ A 'GREEN' LABEL

TerraChoice, an environmental marketing and consulting firm launched by Underwriters Laboratories, estimates that 95 percent of home products make at least one deceptive green claim. It has identified seven things to watch out for:

Hidden Trade-Off: Does the label focus on one or two issues while ignoring others that are also important?

No Proof: Does it offer evidence of its claim, either on the package or on the company website?

Vagueness: What does "environmentally friendly" really mean?

Fakery: Does the label, through words or an image like a logo, give a false impression of third-party certification or endorsement?

Irrelevance: Are the green claims true of all products in the category? Lots of things are "recyclable."

Lesser of Two Evils: Is the claim trying to make you feel "green" about a product category that is basically ungreen? Is organic tobacco green?

Fibbing: Can the manufacturer back up claims?

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