



'Greenwashing' a reality in SA

By Janice Roberts

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Johannesburg - Many product manufacturers are guilty of "greenwashing" with their false claims of "green", "eco-friendly" or "organic," misleading consumers into believing they are purchasing green products, when in fact they are buying into marketing claims.

This is according to Rory Murray, marketing director of Tuffy Brands, who says that the direct dictionary definition of the word "greenwash" is "the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service".

Murray says that 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 greenwashing" which include "hidden trade-offs, no proof, vagueness, false labels, irrelevance, lesser of two evils, and fibbing".

However, the concept of "greenwashing" is not new as consumers have been misled about the environmental benefits of products and services for years.

Movement to make money

"Green is no longer just a colour but has become a movement to make money," Murray states.

"Although we don't have similar concrete figures in SA, we know that greenwashing is a reality in SA and the majority of companies are guilty of deceptive claims."

Murray explains that there is no regulation in SA to combat these claims.

"We firmly believe that a regulatory body is needed to monitor and combat claims as 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."

Murray adds that something needs to be done to police "greenwashing" in SA.

"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."

Fraud

He alleges that some of SA's brands are entirely guilty of "greenwashing" with their use of vague claims such as "organic" when their products may contain highly suspicious and harmful chemicals.

Other false claims include: "environmentally friendly" and even "eco-safe".

"Consumers should demand the truth and the whole truth, as false claims amount to fraud."

Murray points out that the most common claim in SA sits right within the "vagueness sin" and this is the Mobius loop, the universal recycling symbol that is intended to mean that the product is made from recycled material. This symbol is in the public domain, and is not a trademark. As such, any one may use or modify the recycling symbol, royalty free.

He explains: "this is the nifty little recycling symbol found on almost all packaging but does not have a qualifying statement which makes it completely misleading to the consumer. Does it mean the whole product, or that packaging or both are recycled and are they 100% recycled material or less and is it post-consumer waste or pre-consumer waste? There is a big difference."

Caution

He adds that consumers need to be cautious when 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."

Murray says that unfortunately there is no label that exists for this type of information and it seems that it is the consumer's responsibility to check the wording on products carefully and make an educated decision themselves 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.

Ignorance, sloppiness

"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."

Murray adds that Tuffy Brands recently commissioned an independent audit by SGS, the world's leading inspection, verification, testing and certification company "to legitimise that we mean what we say that our products are 100% recycled".

He insists that Tuffy Brands is the only South African refuse bag manufacturer to be fully certified 100% recycled "and we are hoping that this will be used to set an industry standard and other South African companies will follow suit".

However, most "greenwashing" is due to ignorance or sloppiness, he adds, rather

than malicious intent, and businesses and advertising agencies can take simple steps to prevent "greenwashing" slipping through.

"As a consumer, you too can spot the worst 'greenwashing' symptoms and make up your own mind."