



## 'Greenwashing' consumers

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June 16, 2011

The concern surrounding 'Greenwashing' has been compared to the Millennium bug. Just as consumers were frightened about the unknown effects of the dawn of the 21st century, they were bombarded with a wide range of products and services that could alleviate the potential aftermath of the bug's impact. 'Bluewashing' (blue represented something calming and relaxing) emerged in advertising and marketing campaigns. It evoked feelings of protection from out of control technology. The use of color in mass culture to generate emotion is not new as British researcher [Rebecca Swift](#) found.

In 2008, Swift identified a global rise towards 'green' iconography. While scientist and governments were telling us that we are destroying the planet and that we need to change how and what we consume, emotive graphic images and alarming predictions reinforced our fears. Al Gore's 2006 film [An Inconvenient Truth](#), sold probably a generation of people on the idea of 'climate crisis'. This, for many, resulted in a radical shift in our social and economic behavior. We now buy organic food (if you can afford it), compost, decline plastic bags and buy 'green' products, from paper towels to houses. 'Green' labels are powerful for producers and sellers, they act sociologically and economically.

Today, consumer demand for 'greener' products is changing how we shop. As

producers and retailers compete for 'green' consumers, some companies are 'greenwashing' their products. Increases in 'green' labels have been rapid in recent years. U.S. based environmental marketing firm, [TerraChoice](#), has investigated the 'green' claims made by products offered for sale in U.S. stores. They found that products labeled 'green' increased by 73 per cent from 2009 to 2010. Big box stores offered a higher percentage (22.8 per cent) of products with 'green' labels than specialty retailers (11.5 per cent) and green boutique stores (12.8 per cent). They have also found increases in the practice of 'greenwashing'.

'Greenwashing' refers to deceptive marketing designed to portray a company or product as caring for the environment. Organisations mislead consumers by promoting themselves and their products as 'eco-friendly', 'green', 'sustainable' or 'environmentally friendly', when in fact they are having a negative or negligible impact. "Greenwashing" has serious consequences. It can prevent real green change by: diverting spending towards products with negligible or non-existent benefits; preventing truly green products from differentiating themselves; and encouraging more 'greenwash', rather than product innovation.

[Greenpeace](#) claim that corporations are falling all over themselves to demonstrate

that they are environmentally conscious. Consumers are finding it more and more difficult to tell the difference between those companies genuinely dedicated to making a difference and those that are using a green curtain to conceal dark motives.

As 'green' claims have soared, consumers demands for better evidence of claims and better environment standards and certification (eco-labels) has also increased. The [International Organization for Standards \(ISO\)](#) regulation [ISO14024](#) is the international benchmark for eco-labeling. The [Australian](#) government's eco-labeling model (regulated by the Environment Protection and Heritage Council) complies with ISO14024. It is incorporated in the federal government's obligations under the [Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act](#) (1999). Labeling and packaging regulations are also incorporated in the Australian Packaging Covenant (APC). It replaces the National Packaging Covenant in 2010.

There are also voluntary measures available for genuinely 'green' products. The [Environmental Choice Australia Ecolabel](#) is awarded by Good Environmental Choice Australia (GECA) to products that meet voluntary environmental performance standards. GECA standards are also in accordance with ISO14024 and are based on international best practice. They seek to establish minimum environmental performance criteria for a product or service across different parts of a product's life cycle (for example sourcing, manufacture, use and disposal).

In Australia, the [Trade Practices Act](#) (1974) prohibits companies from making misleading and deceptive claims, green or otherwise. The problem is that while many examples of

'greenwash' may not breach the Trade Practices Act, they're just not helpful for consumers or the environment.

Some of the 'greenwashing' campaigns exposed by [TerraChoice](#) have include tactics that suggest a product is 'green' based on an unreasonably narrow set of attributes without attention to other important environmental issues. Paper, for example, is not necessarily environmentally preferable just because it comes from a sustainably harvested forest. Other important environmental issues in the papermaking process, including energy, greenhouse gas emissions, and water and air pollution.

Often claims have no proof or make claims that cannot be substantiated by easily accessible supporting information or by a reliable third-party certification. Common examples are tissue products that claim various percentages of post-consumer recycled content without providing any evidence. Sometimes labels are simply vague, poorly defined, or so broad that its real meaning is likely to be misunderstood by the consumer. "All-natural" is an example. Arsenic, uranium, mercury, and formaldehyde are all naturally occurring, and poisonous. "All natural" isn't necessarily 'green'.

Other products and their advertising campaigns environmental claims that may be truthful but is unimportant or unhelpful for consumers seeking environmentally preferable products. "CFC-free" is a common example, since it is a frequent claim despite the fact that CFC's are banned by law. Slogans like "fuel-efficient sport-utility vehicles" distract consumers from the greater environmental impacts of the category as a whole.

**Choice Australia** encourages consumers to avoid 'greenwashing' by not being distracted with 'green' pictures, or claims that the packet is recyclable or biodegradable regardless of the contents. It encourages consumers to find the specific claim being made, for products it is to find the full list of ingredients and see what evidence is provided to support the claim and for evidence of the whole lifecycle of the product, not just one part of it. Determine if the product is third party certified and ask if it complies with legal national and international standards (ISO14024).

These consumer warnings however are problematic for **energy consumers**. The **Hazelwood power plant** in regional Victoria produces eight per cent of the Australia's national energy grid electricity and 25 per cent of Victoria's electricity needs. A brown coal fired plant, it also produces three per cent of Australia's carbon emissions. Hazelwood is owned by International Power. International Power is owned by global giant **GDF Suez**. GDF Suez has a series of promotional and **advertising products** that boast its clean energy credentials while at the same time 'greenwashing' over its ownership of plants like Hazelwood.

Environmentalists and consumers are now **questioning** the claims of an increasing number of companies and items promoted as 'green'. If the product is too 'green' to be true, it may be a case of 'greenwashing'.