

Dear Eartha,

During the last week or so, my wife and I have been counting how many commercials on television are "green." It was almost 50%! How do you know if these commercials are telling the truth or if it is a marketing scam? - Rick M., Keystone

It is quite amazing to see the growing trend in consumers going "green." Everywhere you look there are safer cleaning products displaying green seals, computers and office equipment with "no hazardous components," energy efficient SUVs... I'd love to tell you that we're moving towards that environmental utopia where everyone cares about carbon footprints, global warming, and diverting waste from the landfill.

Not to be Debbie Downer or anything but haven't you learned not to believe everything you see on TV? Well, I actually had to tell myself that the other day when I saw a Wal-Mart commercial about energy efficiency, a "clean coal" advertisement, and a Clorox ad for a new line of Green Works cleaners. Hmm... so, adding "eco" or "green" to the name of a product or adding green leaves and trees to the label makes up for all the other non-earthly elements? My friend, you've just been greenwashed!

Greenwash is a good "buzz" word to know that protects the environmentally-driven consumer (you) from the misleading and often false "environmental" claims of a company or the products they promote.

It's sad if you think about it, earth stewards have been fighting corporations and businesses for years to take responsibility for their actions and to lighten their impact on the planet. Instead, these corporations somehow bypassed the "action" part and went straight to marketing their so-called actions. In fact, there are several instances where corporations have spent millions of dollars promoting their sustainable products and businesses practices while only spending a fraction on doing what they say they are doing.

In December 2007, TerraChoice released an interesting study called "The Six Sins of Greenwashing" which found that 99% of common and popular consumer products were guilty of greenwashing! They categorized these greenwashing sins into the following:

- "Sin of the Hidden Trade-Off" - A company makes a claim about their products environmental benefits while failing to mention the larger negative factors. TerraChoice found "energy-efficient" electronics containing hazardous materials like mercury and lead.
- "Sin of No Proof" - A company advertises its products are environmental but make it nearly impossible to verify this claim with data or a third party. For example, a "certified organic" lotion with no verifiable certification.
- "Sin of Vagueness" - A company makes environmental claims that are vague or too broad for consumers to understand. Products that claim to be 100% natural but contain toxins such as arsenic, dioxin, or parabens, which all have been found to be harmful to human health.

- “Sin of Irrelevance” – Pointless claims that try to make you think a product is environmentally beneficial above and beyond other products. Such as products that claim to be “CFC-free” or pro-ozone even though CFC’s have been banned since 1978.
- “Sin of Fibbing” – Products that outright lie about internationally recognized certifications like Energy Star or Green Seal. And you ask yourself why these certifiable organizations let this one slip through the crack?
- “Sin of Lesser of the Two Evils” – Environmental claims that are just questionable all together like organic cigarettes and environmentally friendly pesticides. Now come one, is the average consumer really that gullible?

Corporations recognize that our society is interested in reversing the long history of negative impact on the earth. Popular products that have been pointed out as earth-hazards must step it up and compete with those promoting earth-loving products.

Think about it, which would you choose? Would you choose the bottle with a recycling symbol and “biodegradable and non-toxic” language on the label or the bottle without? None of the previous eco-decorations would necessarily represent an organic or “green” product. Yet, it makes you feel good, like you’re doing the right thing.

What’s the consumer to do? How can you be sure that you are buying what the product says you are buying? How do you know if it is truly “green?” There are several organizations out there that are watching out for the consumer and prepared to battle those tricky greenwashers. The Greenwashing Index is an online tool that allows visitors to evaluate real advertisements and grade them on a greenwashing scale. The website also helps consumers to become more knowledgeable about marketing scams while teaching them to hold businesses accountable for their environmental claims.

Organizations like StopGreenwash.org and Green Peace encourage consumers to increase market demand for real sustainable businesses practices. They teach you to draw attention to greenwashers and misleading claims through websites, blogs, and other outreach opportunities... tell your friends and family members. You can always contact the Federal Trade Commission or the Better Business Bureau about greenwashers and false advertisers.

Finally, do your homework! Read the label and ask questions. If something doesn’t seem right, contact the company and ask more questions.

Eartha Steward is written by Carly Wier, Jennifer Kirkpatrick and Beth Orstad, consultants on all things eco and chic at the High Country Conservation Center, a nonprofit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to waste reduction and resource conservation in our mountain community. Eartha believes that you can walk gently on our planet, even if you’re wearing style shoes.

Submit questions to Eartha at eartha@highcountryconservation.org with Ask Eartha as the subject or to High Country Conservation Center, P.O. Box 4506, Frisco, CO 80443.