



Green Sheen

By Kim Shiffman

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Ottawa-based environmental marketer TerraChoice reported a 79% increase in the number of green products on the shelves of the North American big-box retailers it visited in 2009 compared to 2007. Great news, right? Yes and no. Trouble is, not all products and services that claim to be green really are. Unfortunately, some companies are "greenwashing"—that is, misleading consumers regarding their products' environmental benefits.

Here's what you need look out for when shopping for products for your home:

Fake labels

From flooring to spackle, many home-improvement products carry logos that seem to endorse the product as eco-friendly. Some manufacturers go to the expense of certifying their products as eco-friendly by an objective third party. But others simply design their own logo to create the impression that the product is green-certified. "The marketplace is cluttered with logos," says Beatrice Olivastri, CEO of Ottawa non-profit organization Friends of the Earth Canada. "Some are meaningless whereas others are valid." Legitimate ecolabels, which make their standards publicly available and are transparent about how they develop their standards, include EcoLogo, GreenSeal, GREENGUARD, FSC and SFI, among others. Before buying a product based on its logo,

do your homework about what the labels actually mean.



Avoid greenwashed claims of products that aren't up to eco-friendly snuff.

Flat-out fibs

It's rare for a product's label to blatantly lie. Indeed, just 1% of the Canadian products TerraChoice investigated for its 2009 report Seven Sins of Greenwashing committed the "sin of fibbing." But the labels on some paint cans do just that. Many paints are now labelled as "zero VOC"—and that claim, says Scott McDougall, president of TerraChoice, is patently untrue. It's good news that paint manufacturers are reducing the volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in paint, because they've been proven to be bad for indoor air quality and the environment. But the paint industry recently decided paint that contains five grams per litre or less of VOCs can still be called "zero

VOC." "It's troubling because it's empirically false," says McDougall. Your best bet, he says, is to look for a paint that carries the EcoLogo or GreenSeal certification logo. "This way, even if the VOC claim isn't quite true, you're still getting the greenest paint available to you."

Hidden trade-offs

Some products call themselves green based on some of their attributes, but don't call enough attention to other important environmental issues. Take lumber, for example. You can now buy lumber that comes from a sustainably harvested forest; it carries the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) logo, and it's definitely a greener choice than regular lumber. "The problem is when the product or the retailer claims that the lumber is 'green,' full stop, based only on FSC certification," says McDougall. Fact is, even FSC-certified lumber is not necessarily environmentally friendly just because it comes from a sustainably harvested forest; other important environmental issues in the lumber-making process, including energy, greenhouse gas emissions, and water and air pollution, may be equally or more significant. McDougall does advocate buying FSC-certified lumber products, but also suggests learning as much as you can about how the lumber was made and how far it has come. "Suggesting it's green in a final way is an overstatement," says McDougall, "and the consumer needs to be aware."

Vague claims

That glass cleaner that says it's "planet friendly?" The laundry detergent that's "plant based"? The cork and bamboo flooring that's "green"? The claims may in fact be true, but they are so poorly defined or broad

that their real meaning can easily be misunderstood by consumers, says McDougall. Take "all-natural," for example. Arsenic, mercury and formaldehyde are all naturally occurring, and yet poisonous, so "all-natural" isn't necessarily green. Look for products that define their claims, or check for (legitimate) eco-logos.

New ads, old stock

The flyer for your local store proclaims, "We sell high-efficiency air conditioners!" But when you get to the store, many of the units—and indeed, all the units that are on sale—are older, less efficient models. Olivastris says some retailers like to advertise their green products because that's what gets people in the door, but equally like to sell their old stock. As innovative new green products come on the market, this practice of dumping old stock will continue. It's not greenwashing in the strictest sense, but Olivastris says it's a form of manipulation consumers ought to be aware of. Lesson: don't assume the eco-friendly product you read or heard about in an advertisement is the same product you'll find featured prominently on store shelves.

Ending Greenwashing

The Government of Canada, through its Competition Bureau, is aware of the greenwashing problem and is doing something about it. In the summer of 2008, it released new guidelines for advertisers making environmental claims, discouraging, among other things, claims that are vague and unsubstantiated. A company that greenwashes could be fined up to \$100,000, and a company executive could be thrown in jail for up to five years.