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This article is the first in a [six-part series](#) focused on helping consumers choose safer products that align with their values.

You may spend only a few seconds deciding among dozens of nearly identical products on a shelf at the grocery store, but a lot of factors go into the decision. Consumers care about cost, nutrition, whether there is room in our cramped kitchen cupboards — and the environmental impact of the product. Was it manufactured sustainably? Were workers or animals harmed to make it? Is the packaging (and the product itself) recyclable? We know that our consumer choices [have an impact](#) far beyond the register, but with so many competing concerns, how do we shop our values?

How We Shop

One recent [consumer study](#) attempted to answer that question. The survey of 2,100 people in 25 cities across the country found that 68.3 percent of Americans want to use their power as consumers to influence corporate practices. A third of us wish we could just shop without having to think about larger social issues, though. Consumer fatigue is not surprising considering the proliferation of consumer products boasting specialty eco-labels and health claims. In some cases, it can be a problem of too much information and not enough knowledge.

Confusing Labels

For every environmental issue, corporate practices can range from wanton environmental destruction through [greenwashing](#) to genuinely sustainable. And all along that spectrum, there are certification systems setting the bar where they think standard practice should be.

With so much variation among certification standards, it helps to know what the labels actually mean. For example, if you care about safe working conditions and fair pay for workers, there are at least three different [fair trade](#) certification systems. They operate in

different regions of the world, certify different products, and have different requirements for certification. Various studies have found their impact to be inconsistent at best. Unless a consumer has done detailed research on the standards, a fair trade label only indicates a probable improvement over standard industry practices. The same is true for many other environmental labels, including organic, cruelty-free, local, and nontoxic.

Conflicting Values

Most people care about more than one environmental issue, but very few products are certified across all relevant aspects of production. There are almost always trade-offs. Plus, concern for the environment is not the only consideration in making a purchase. Even if you find coffee that is both organic and fair trade, you might not be able to afford it.

According to the survey mentioned above, most consumers have a hierarchy of values that will influence their shopping decisions. But it's not always the result of rational consideration or even reflective of real-world impact. For example, Americans feel most guilty when they leave the lights on, and least guilty about eating meat. But leaving a compact fluorescent light bulb on for 24 hours [uses](#) only .35 kWh of electricity, producing just under [half a pound of carbon dioxide](#). Meanwhile, eating [a single hamburger](#) produces four pounds of that powerful greenhouse gas.

What do American consumers feel most guilty about?

We asked 2,100 people:
"On a scale of 1-5, how guilty or bad do you feel when you do any of the following?"



SOURCE: Survey of U.S. residents conducted by Crestline Custom Promotional Products

Image: [Crestline](#)

Shopping Strategies

Our values are very personal, but our decisions don't have to be made on instinct and emotion in the moment of purchase. Prioritize one or two issues to focus your own efforts, and find out which actions can make the most difference for those issues. Whether your

primary concern is [fair trade](#), organic, or buying local, learn about the different certification systems that apply to it. Then commit to supporting the labels and manufacturers whose standards align most closely with your values and join the boycotts you believe in most strongly.

Remember that [precycling](#) and buying second-hand are not only greener, they also help save money for more sustainable versions of the items you must buy new. When you do have to make a big purchase, whether it's a [mattress](#), a [cell phone](#), or a [new roof](#), check Earth911's buyers' guides to learn about the greenest options available.

Shopping is never going to save the planet, and no one is capable of living carbon-free. But armed with information, we can at least choose to spend in ways that [encourage companies](#) to do better.

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