

How To Spot Greenwashing | Earth 911

Gemma Alexander

More of us are concerned about making environmentally conscious purchases, and marketers have our number. But “eco-friendly” wording on a product’s packaging doesn’t necessarily mean that the item is more sustainable than other brands. To be smart shoppers, we need to learn how to spot greenwashing.

As if getting your hands on whatever the hot new toy is each year isn’t stressful enough, holiday shopping, like everything else, is harder than usual in 2020. But whether we’re trying to maintain physical distance while battling it out in the toy aisle or just enduring weary hours in online shopping portals, we’ll feel better in the long run if we don’t give up on [shopping our values](#). When you don’t have time to carefully research every single purchase, it helps to know how to quickly recognize greenwashing. In this article, we describe two of the most common ways that marketers greenwash products: hidden trade-offs and unsubstantiated claims.

Greenwashing

If you’re not already familiar with the term [greenwashing](#), it’s the practice of marketing products in a way designed to convince consumers that the product is more environmentally friendly than it actually is. There may be no such thing as a truly sustainable consumer product. But some products definitely have less environmental impact than others. Those are the ones most people want to buy.

[Marketing studies](#) show that 78% of Americans believe companies should be environmentally responsible and 64% say they feel happy when buying sustainable products. That should inspire companies to make greener products. But some companies respond to that information with, “Let’s don’t and say we did.”

Hidden Trade-offs

A [classic study](#) in 2007 determined that the hidden trade-off is the most common form of greenwashing, applying to 57% of green marketing claims. Consumers are already aware of a similar practice regarding nutrition claims in food marketing. Think of the many food products labeled “low fat.” The claim may be accurate. But in many cases, it primarily serves to direct attention from large amounts of added sugar. Such foods are no healthier than their regular, full-fat versions.

The hidden trade-off applies this same approach to environmental claims. It often relies on a single environmental claim like “recycled content,” while ignoring other – often more important – aspects of sustainability.

Take the common example of paper. Paper often bears the recycling symbol and the words “recycled content.” On closer inspection, the paper may contain 10% recycled content, while the rest is made from unsustainably harvested virgin pulp. But even if the paper is 100% recycled that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s greener. Such paper may be heavily bleached in an effort to give it the bright white appearance of

unrecycled paper. In that case, the recycled paper may waste more water and create more pollution than regular paper.

Recycled content, less packaging, fewer [VOCs](#), and other environmental claims are best practices. Each one may result in a lower overall environmental impact. But, like the sugary low-fat food or overbleached paper, it may involve trade-offs that cancel out any improvements. Either way, a single change is rarely enough to classify a product as sustainable, or to give a company the kind of market advantage that offering a truly better product should confer.

If you see a product advertising a single environmental claim without indicating a broader commitment to sustainability, then you have probably spotted a case of greenwashing.

Unsubstantiated Claims

According to the same study, at least a quarter of the time you will catch a greenwasher with the old adage, “Trust but verify.” That’s because, if you read the fine print on the packaging or visit the product website, you will not be able to find proof of 26% of environmental claims made on packaging or in advertisements. The best form of proof is a third-party certification label. (Such labels can be used for greenwashing, too – but that’s a topic for another day).

But even if a product isn’t certified sustainable, the manufacturer should provide evidence to explain the basis of their claim.

Those rapidly stated, low volume caveats in commercials may be annoying. But they at least give some idea of the value of the marketing claim. If a lightbulb is touted as 25% more efficient, the packaging or website should tell you two things: what kind of lightbulb it compares to, and how the efficiency was measured. If a company can support their eco-friendly claim with hard data, they have every reason to make it available to consumers. So if that information isn’t provided, you’ve probably spotted a case of greenwashing.

Hidden trade-offs and unsubstantiated claims are not the only forms of greenwashing. But they are the ones you are most likely to see. Once you’ve learned to identify them, you can avoid the majority of misleading environmental marketing schemes.

You Might Also Like...