Greenwashing

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The belief that consumer demand for “environmentally friendly” products and services will encourage industry to perform in a more sustainable manner has been much touted by both government and industry alike. The strategy is simple: place ecolabels and/or ecosymbols on products deemed environmentally superior to their counterparts to allow consumers to make more environmentally conscious purchasing decisions. Consumers face a growing selection of advertising and labeling encouraging them to buy products or services that claim to reduce their personal ecological footprint. Ecolabels and ecosymbols can be found on a plethora of products, with certain retailers claiming exclusive use of their own copyrights or trademarks. However, on closer scrutiny, it is clear that many ecolabeling schemes have more to do with greenwashing than bona fide environmental protection. Greenwashing is a term derived from “whitewashing” by environmentalists, who claim that some corporations want to present an environmentally responsible public image by misleading consumers regarding their environmental practices or the benefits of their products or services.

There are many factors that account for the general failure of ecolabels to promote the sale of environmentally superior products, but this failure can ultimately be attributed to the misuse and abuse of ecolabels on the part of industry, the lack of government regulations covering these labels, and too few government-certified environmental labeling schemes based on the findings of objective life cycle assessment studies. Furthermore, the relative ignorance of consumers regarding ecolabeling is a major problem. As such, there exists much potential for the improvement of ecolabeling schemes.

Environmental labeling was adopted in principle by governments at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development to “encourage expansion of environmental labeling and other environmentally related product information programs designed to assist consumers to make informed choices.” The Canadian Standards Association, along with the International Organization for Standardization established a technical committee to develop international environmental labeling standards. An environmental claim can be any statement, graphic, or symbol that refers to or creates the general impression that it reflects the environmental aspects of any product or service through packaging labels, product literature, technical bulletins, advertising, publicity, telemarketing, and digital or electronic media including the Internet. The three types of ecolabels identified by CAN/CSA-ISO 14021 include the following:

Type 1: Labels from independent third parties who award them to the best environmental performers in various product categories. For example, in Canada the Environmental Choice Ecologo (http://ecologo.org) is awarded to companies by the federal government through TerraChoice Marketing,
Inc. Companies must pay licensing fees after the submission of life cycle assessments—studies that pass a peer review. Similarly, in the United States, Green Seal (http://greenseal.org) is a nonprofit, third-party certifier that has been advocating a life cycle assessment approach since 1989. Other schemes include the European Union Eco-label (flower), the German Blue Angel, and the Nordic Swan of Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Norway.

**Type 2:** Self-declared labels used by manufacturers to make environmental claims about their products. These represent the vast majority of ecolabels, likely because there are few government regulations and no licensing fees to pay.

**Type 3:** A much less common label licensed by independent organizations. This label serves as a report card, providing information on the possible environmental impact of a product and leaving it to the consumer to decide which product is best.

The true value of ecolabels rests on faith by consumers that the environmental information provided is credible, objective, and easily understood. Unfortunately, research indicates this is generally not the case, and a recent study found most ecolabels contain some form of greenwashing. A 2007 study of type 2 self-declared labels by TerraChoice Marketing, Inc., examined labels on products claiming to be “environmentally friendly” in six leading big box retail stores in the United States and Canada. Green claims were examined against accepted practices as defined by the International Organization for Standardization and Consumer Affairs Canada. The researchers found 1,018 consumer products bearing 1,753 environmental claims, and they found that 1,017 products made claims that are demonstrably false or that risk misleading intended audiences. Six categories of greenwashing were identified, including the following and their frequency:

- **1. Hidden Trade-Offs** (57 percent): Suggesting a product is “green” based on one or a narrow set of desirable attributes without acknowledging other important or more important environmental issues. These claims may not be false; instead, they create a “greener” image for the product than a life cycle assessment would support through empirical evidence. For example, paper that promotes its recycled content or sustainable harvesting practices while ignoring the relatively poor performance of emissions, effluents, and greenhouse gases associated with that manufacturer.
- **2. No Proof** (26 percent): Claims that cannot be verified by easily accessible supporting documentation (point of purchase or company Website) or by a reliable third-party certification.
- **3. Vagueness** (11 percent): Claims that are poorly defined or too broad, including: green, environmentally friendly, nontoxic, all-natural, and the ubiquitous use of the mobius loop symbol. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission and the International Organization for Standardization consider most of these terms to be too vague to be meaningful to consumers unless qualified with empirical evidence, which often they are not.
4. **Irrelevance** (4 percent): Claims that may be accurate but that are unimportant or irrelevant, such as claims that relate to chlorofluorocarbons that have been illegal for over three decades (i.e., no products are manufactured with chlorofluorocarbons).

5. **Lesser of Two Evils** (1 percent): These are claims that may be true but that risk distracting the consumer from more serious environmental effects of the product category, such as organic cigarettes and green insecticides/herbicides.

6. **Fibbing** (1 percent): Claims that are untrue and/or the illegal use of certified ecologos.

Despite the prevalence of greenwashing, Futerra Sustainability Communications points out that this problem exists mainly because of ignorance and/or sloppiness, as opposed to corporations demonstrating malicious intent. Despite the lack of government regulations concerning ecolabeling, the U.K. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs points out that businesses and advertisers can prevent greenwashing in self-declared labels by taking into account the quality of the actual information being communicated (i.e., content), the way in which the information is presented (i.e., presentation), and the steps and methods taken to verify its accuracy (i.e., assurance of accuracy). The U.K. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs suggests that the content of the claim should be accurate and truthful, relevant, specific, and unambiguous. The presentation of the claim should ensure that the claim uses plain language, that all relevant information is presented together, and that the meaning of any symbols or pictures is clear and relevant. To ensure accuracy, claims should be substantiated and verifiable, updated as necessary, based on the best agreed standards available, and supported by information needed to verify its accuracy.

Unfortunately, greenwashing exists because most countries do not regulate ecolabels with the same vigor that they regulate food labels. It is caveat emptor for the time being.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781412973809.n80

**See Also:**

- Advertising
- Ecolabeling
- Green Consumer
- Green Marketing.

Further Readings

