

How to Spot Fake Green Products

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Watch for sneaky labels

Terms like "eco-friendly," "green" and "gentle" are the kind of buzz words marketers love to splash all over their products. But what do they actually mean? The problem for consumers, as Scott McDougall, president and CEO of Ottawa-based TerraChoice, says, is that advertisers can use such vague terms without having to back them up. "It's controversial [of them], but not wrong in many ways," he says. When faced with such hazy definitions, shoppers should seek clarity, McDougall advises. The better a "green" product defines its environmental ambitions on the label, the better the product is likely to be.

Check for third-party seals

If you're ever sceptical about a product, Canadian shoppers can check to see if it's been approved by a third-party eco-evaluator. Brands with the Ecologo, Energy Star or Watersense seal can be trusted, McDougall says, and all come with certified government approval. One caveat: Even though government seals cover a wide variety of products — paper towel, household cleaners and even some home electronics, for example — not every item on store shelves fall under their umbrella. "Certification isn't everywhere," says McDougall. "In the absence of it, you

should choose a product that's making a green claim and doing its best to explain itself."

Know the sins of Greenwashing

TerraChoice has made its name, in part, for its Seven Sins of Greenwashing (SSOG), a list that's evolved each year since its debut in 2007. The SSOG lists many of the strategies consumers should be wary of when shopping for green products, including two approaches unique to TerraChoice's list: the "sin of irrelevance" warns shoppers against falling for beside-the-point labels — like, for example, when a product boasts about being CFC-free when CFC is banned by law anyway. Or there is the "sin of lesser of two evils," which outlines the risks of consumers overlooking the greater environmental impacts of a product (think: the fuelefficient SUV). Check out TerraChoice's complete SSOG list [here](#).

Do your homework

If all else fails, the Internet is here for a reason. Should you find yourself wondering about a certain item or product, simply pop its name into a search engine along with the word "environment" or "green" and see what comes back. Chances are, McDougall says, if consumer advocate groups have a problem with the validity of a product's green claims, you'll find them here. If nothing shows up,

you're probably in the clear to go ahead and buy the product.

Check for specifics

TerraChoice's McDougall notes that, since 2007, there's been a "green" product increase of about 700 per cent in some consumer categories. What's this mean? Well, for one, there's bound to be a million new so-called eco-friendly products to consider, but the cream should still rise to the top. Even if you're overwhelmed by options, check the specifics on each label. If a product says it's made from partly recycled paper, make sure it says exactly what percentage. Don't settle for far-reaching definitions that marketers craft to reel in shoppers, McDougall says. The more info, the better.

Beware eco tradeoffs

As part of TerraChoice's Seven Sins of Greenwashing, McDougall advises consumers to think big picture when they shop for green items. Using the example from the previous slide, some manufacturers boast about their eco-intentions by using a percentage of recycled paper for their products. But what if, considering the emissions needed to recycle that paper, the materials used to make the product are actually worse for the environment than if the company manufactured the product through the conventional route? "Everything has tradeoffs, and there is certainly no such thing as a perfectly green product," says McDougall. "But beware of hidden tradeoffs, with an emphasis on the word 'hidden.'" Make sure, if a marketer claims it uses an eco-friendly

process, it states just how that process is better for the environment.

Stick to your guns

At the end of the day, McDougall notes, even attempting to buy green is a step in the right direction. So if you end up getting duped by deceptive marketing, don't fret. "It's better that we buy products that at least claim to be green rather than not at all," McDougall says, noting that shoppers should — in conjunction with the aforementioned tips — often go with their gut. "By putting [in] the effort to go green, we're boosting the market demand for green products and are actually out changing the world," he says. "Consumers can keep the pressure on marketers for more transparency" in their labelling by insisting on more details.