

Thou Shall Not Sin - Greenwashing Edition

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Ashley Spigelman is a graduate of the Honours Bachelor of Commerce - Human Resources Management program. In this blog entry, she brings awareness to the concept of greenwashing, how to spot it, and offers best practices for consumers against it.

What is greenwashing? No, it's not washing items in green-dyed liquid. Greenwashing is a sustainability term, that is unbeknownst to most people. To put it simply, greenwashing refers to buyers being deceived by businesses via their marketing strategy, declaring to be sustainable or environmentally friendly (Gallagher, 2021).



Fig. 1. Taylor, Amy. "Greenwashing: Don't Be Fooled." *100days Of Real Food*, 21 July 2017.

During my studies at Seneca, I was able to dabble in sustainability and all of the facets that it contains. Greenwashing was a topic that was briefly touched upon in class, but immediately caught my attention and thus propelled me into researching more about it. I was shocked at the findings, and most importantly, shocked that businesses could and were misleading consumers and subsequently getting away with it. For those who aren't aware of what I'm talking about, let me fill you in.

When it comes to sustainability, there are many aspects that people are familiar with (e.g., carbon footprint, global warming, climate change, recycling and eco-friendly), however, it's more than just those terms. Greenwashing is a part of sustainability that typically goes unnoticed by most people, as we don't think twice as to what labels are saying. I believe we, as consumers, are taken advantage of and take for granted that the words advertised on products are in fact the absolute truth. In fact, I learned that this is not the case and that companies use greenwashing as a ploy to acquire more customers, thus increasing their revenue and notoriety.

While greenwashing is an overarching term, there are seven concrete ways to spot it called, 'The seven sins of greenwashing'. These are, "hidden trade-offs, no proof, vagueness, worshipping false labels, irrelevant claims, lesser of two evils and fibbing" (Cowley, 2022).



SIN OF THE HIDDEN TRADE-OFF

A claim suggesting that a product is 'green' based on a narrow set of attributes without attention to other important environmental issues.

Example: Paper is not necessarily



SIN OF IRRELEVANCE

An environmental claim that may be truthful but is unimportant or unhelpful for consumers seeking environmentally preferable products.





Fig. 2. Short, Sophie. "Seven Sins of Greenwashing." *Social Enterprise Mark CIC*, 23 March 2017.

The **hidden trade-off** sin is when a company claims a product is "eco-friendly", hiding behind a small set of eco-friendly practices while not addressing all or even its most significant issues. The **no proof** sin is when a company states they are "green" but fails to provide certification or any further information about this. **Vagueness** refers to the lack of explanation about the products and use terms like "natural", "green" or "cruelty-free". **Worshipping false labels** sin is when a company makes the consumer assume there is a 3rd party validation, when in fact there is none. **Irrelevance** refers to when a company advertises a claim, which in fact is true but is entirely extraneous to the item. The **lesser of two evils** sin is when companies make a true declaration about their product but it's actually distracting the consumer from the bigger issue with using such a product or company. Lastly, **fibbing** is when a company insinuates statements are true when they are not, creating inauthentic certificates or outright lies. This last one typically does not happen as companies know there are serious legal consequences to this (Cowley, 2022).

In order to prevent yourself from falling for these seven sins, there are a few ways to scope out if a company is trying to mislead you. You can:

- 1) Read labels very carefully and to their full extent. Any claims that stand out as far-fetched or lack clarification is most likely a sign of greenwashing.
- 2) Claims should be clearly indicated on the packaging and legible and can be easily understood.
- 3) Look for authentic sustainability certifications on the packaging, which indicates that the product has been certified by a 3rd-party for a sustainable practice. Some of these certifications include: "Certified B Corp.", OEKO-TEX, Energy Star, The Rainforest Alliance, NON-GMO Project Verified" (Cowley, 2022) and many more.
- 4) Transparency is key. If a company fails to provide information about its products or withholds certain information, then they might be trying to scam you.

The bottom line is, if you are looking for authentic eco-friendly, recyclable, bio-degradable, organic, sustainable, environmentally safe products make sure you are equipped with the knowledge and capabilities to not get caught by a company's greenwashing scheme. While we may believe that companies should be honest and authentic, it is up to us to ensure we do our due diligence. If we are true sustainability believers, we need to not only respect our own values and ethics, but also the environment and world as a whole. We have the power, so let's put our power into action and make the changes that will invoke positive outcomes.

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