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Clues That Green Marketing Might Be Green Washing

By Steve J. Bernas of the Better Business Bureau, October 12, 2010



"Green marketing" is booming. All kinds of products are labeled or advertised with claims that the products are environmentally friendly. But which claims are truthful? Concerns are growing that some green marketing is just "green washing".

"In recent years, businesses have increasingly used 'green' marketing to capture consumers' attention and move Americans toward a more environmentally friendly future. But what companies think green claims mean and what consumers really understand are sometimes two different things," says the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).

One environmental marketing business defines green washing as "the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service." The marketing business goes on to list what it calls the "Seven Sins of Green Washing":

The Hidden Trade-Off - Focusing narrowly on one desirable attribute of a product without regard to other important issues.

No Proof - Making a claim without adequate substantiation or certification from a reliable third party.

Vagueness - Using a poorly defined or broad claim that consumers can easily misunderstand.

False Labels - Giving the impression of third-party endorsement where none exists.

Irrelevance - Stating a truthful claim that's unimportant or unhelpful in finding environmentally friendly products.

Lesser of Two Evils - Using a true claim about a product category at the risk of distracting from the environmental impact as a whole.

Fibbing - Making a claim that's simply false.

Green washing is coming under more scrutiny. The FTC is reviewing its Guides for the Use of Environmental Marketing Claims, also known as the Green Guides. For tips from the FTC on sorting out 'green' advertising claims, see:

<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/general/gen02.shtm>

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