

HOW TO SPOT “GREENWASHING”

IN THE CURRENT GOLD RUSH TO GREEN, “GREENWASHING”—OR THE ACT OF OVERSTATING THE ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS OF A PRODUCT OR SERVICE—IS ON THE RISE



Catherine Watkins

Green can be gold these days, as products increasingly exhibit glowing claims about their environmental benefits in order to boost sales. Some claims are easily exposed as false, such as the dishwasher detergent that alleges to be packaged in “100% recycled paper” and yet is sold in a plastic container. But other claims are less easily exposed as misleading.

Globally, different national guidelines and standards exist—most of them voluntary and many currently under review—to regulate environmental marketing claims. In addition, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO: www.iso.org) developed its ISO 14000 family of standards to address various aspects of environmental management, including environmental management systems, labeling, performance evaluation, life cycle analysis, communication, and auditing.

Despite the guidelines and standards, “greenwashing,” or the act of overstating the environmental benefits of a product or service, is on the rise. The UK Advertising Standards Authority, for instance, found that complaints about green claims “increased dramatically” in 2007 to 561, up from 117 the previous year. But short of taking the time to look for ISO 14000 or other third-party certification on products, is there an easy way to spot greenwashing?

THE SIX SINS OF GREENWASHING™

TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc., a self-proclaimed “scientific marketing agency” based in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, set out in 2007 to “describe, understand, and quantify the growth of greenwashing” in North America. After recording thousands of environmental claims on 1,018 products, the firm’s staff tested those claims against current best practices in environmental marketing.

TerraChoice identified what it calls the Six Sins of Greenwashing (see www.terrachoice.com) and found that of the 1,018 products examined, “all but one made claims that [were] demonstrably false or that [risked] misleading intended audiences.”

These transgressions include the following:

1. The *Sin of the Hidden Tradeoff* was the most frequently committed sin in the study, made by 57% of all claims. This sin is perpetrated by suggesting a product is “green” based on a single environmental attribute (the recycled content of paper, for example) or an unreasonably narrow set of attributes (recycled content and chlorine-free bleaching) without attention to other important environmental issues (such as energy, climate change, water, and forestry impacts of paper).

2. The *Sin of No Proof* constitutes any environmental claim that cannot be substantiated by easily accessible supporting information or by a reliable third-party certification. TerraChoice defined “no proof” as occurring if supporting evidence was not accessible at either the point of purchase or at the product website. A total of 454 products and approximately 26% of the claims studied committed this sin.

For example, the company found a number of household lamps and lights that promoted their energy efficiency without any supporting evidence or certification, as well as personal care products that claimed not to have been tested on animals but offered no evidence or certification of this claim.

3. The *Sin of Vagueness* is committed by every claim that is so poorly defined or broad that its real meaning is likely to be misunderstood by the intended consumer. In the TerraChoice research sample, 196 products, or 11% of the claims, committed this sin.

These claims generally are meaningless, on reflection, but not every consumer stops to think, when reading a product is “chemical-free,” that nothing is free of chemicals. “Nontoxic” is another claim without meaning, given that



Scott McDougall, president of TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc. (Ottawa, Ontario, Canada), is pictured here examining some of the 1,018 consumer products the firm studied for evidence of greenwashing. Opposite page: TerraChoice's greenwashing "demon." Images courtesy of TerraChoice.

virtually everything is toxic in sufficient dosage. Other vague claims that are proliferating include “all natural,” “green,” “environmentally friendly,” and “eco-conscious.” All such claims are meaningless without elaboration.

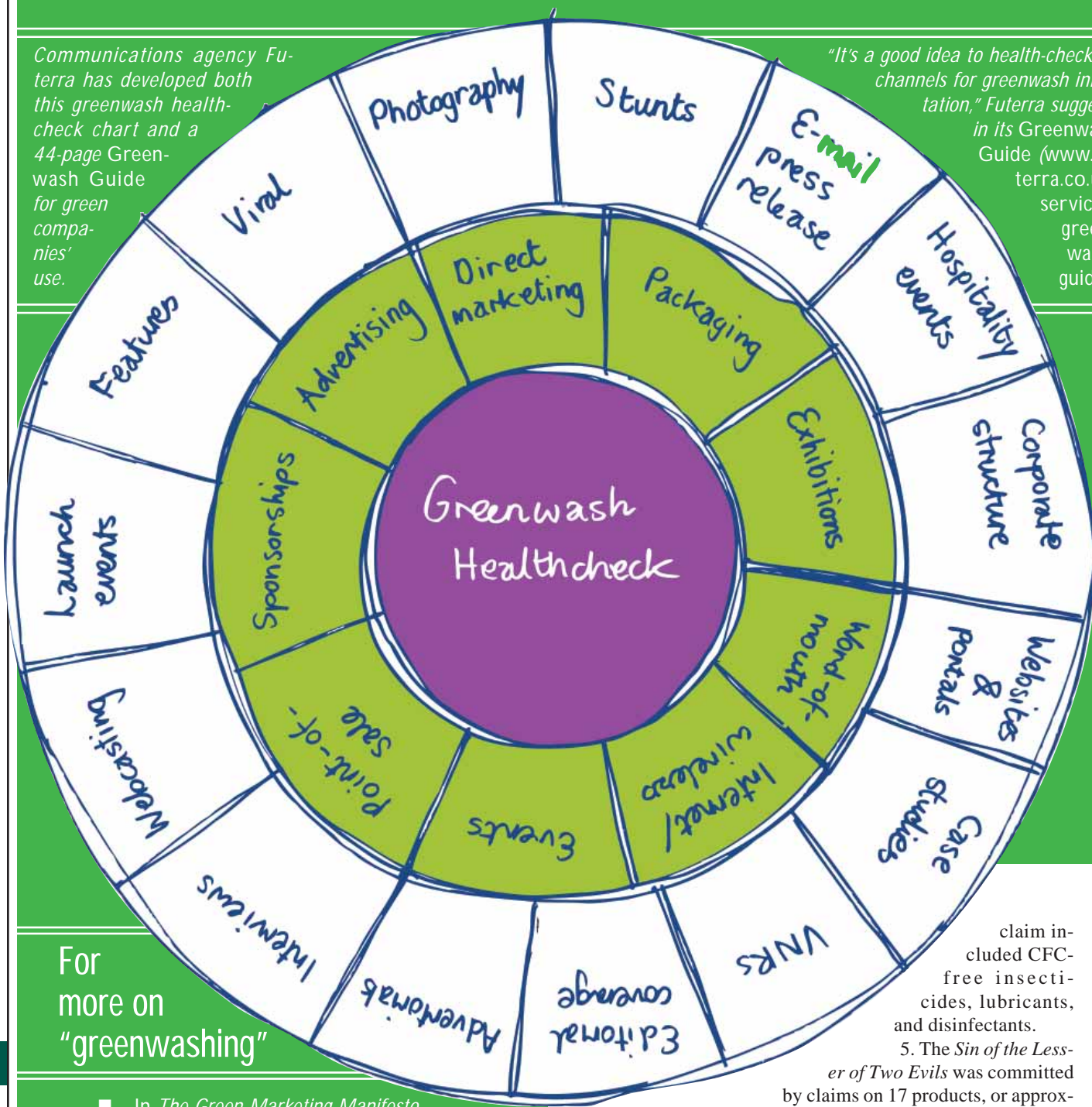
4. The *Sin of Irrelevance* was committed by 4% of the claims reviewed in the study, or 78 products. Such claims may be truthful but are unimportant and unhelpful for consumers seeking environmentally preferable products.

The most frequent example of an irrelevant claim relates to chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), considered to be a contributor to ozone depletion. CFCs have been banned in North America for almost 30 years, so there are no products that are manufactured with them. Products in the sample carrying such a

GREENWASHING

Communications agency Futerra has developed both this greenwash health-check chart and a 44-page Greenwash Guide for green companies' use.

"It's a good idea to health-check all channels for greenwash infestation," Futerra suggests in its Greenwash Guide (www.futerra.co.uk/services/greenwash-guide).



For more on "greenwashing"

■ In *The Green Marketing Manifesto*, John Grant provides tips on how to organize green marketing effectively and sustainably. Published in 2008, the book is available from John Wiley & Sons, Inc. (ISBN: 9780470723241).

■ Another tool to help companies "get their green messaging right" is the *Greenwash Guide* developed by Futerra, a communications agency based in London and New York.

"The majority of greenwash," the agency notes, "is the result of overeager communications campaigns that lack environmental rigor" rather than a result of malicious intent. Download the 44-page guide at www.futerra.co.uk/services/greenwash-guide.

claim included CFC-free insecticides, lubricants, and disinfectants.

5. The *Sin of the Lesser of Two Evils* was committed by claims on 17 products, or approximately 1% of the claims studied. Although these claims may be true within the product category, they risk diverting consumers from the greater environmental impacts of the category as a whole. The perfect example is organic cigarettes.

As John Grant, author of *The Green Marketing Manifesto* and co-founder of the London-based St. Luke's advertising agency, writes: "You can't put a lettuce in the window of a butcher's shop and declare that you are now 'turning vegetarian.'"

6. The *Sin of Fibbing*, or making claims that are simply false, was committed by 10 products studied, which constituted less than 1% of the total claims reviewed. As an exam-

ple, several shampoos in the sample claimed to be “certified organic,” but further research found no such certification.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF GREENWASHING

TerraChoice, which plans to perform its review of environmental claims annually, proposes that there are a number of negative consequences of pervasive greenwashing.

First, misleading well-intentioned consumers into purchases that do not deliver on their environmental promise squanders the potential benefit of those purchases. Next, products sporting illegitimate environmental claims might take market share away from products with legitimate benefits, thus slowing the growth of real environmental innovation. Finally, additional studies suggest that greenwashing is creating cynicism and distrust by consumers of all environmental claims. If consumers reject products that truly are environmentally responsible out of distrust, the incentive for companies to engage in green product innovation will be eliminated.

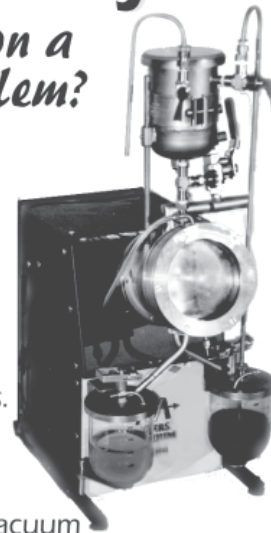
“Avoiding greenwashing does not require waiting for a perfect product,” the TerraChoice report says. “It does mean that sound science, honesty, and transparency are paramount.”

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