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Greenwashing

In today's world, more and more people are becoming environmentally aware and trying to minimize their negative impact (or "footprint") on the planet. Thus, as consumers, they seek out products that fit this mission. In fact, a 2017 study found that 87% of Americans would buy a product with a social and environmental benefit if given the opportunity and that 92% would be more likely to trust a company that supports social or environmental issues. For younger people, who will face the brunt of climate change effects, this trend is even more apparent, with 68% of millennials having bought a product with a social or environmental benefit in the past 12 months. Companies are well aware how important environmental action is to us consumers. Unfortunately, some companies have tried to capitalize on the trend, without actually incorporating sustainable practices.

Greenwashing refers to a deceptive marketing practice, in which a company conveys a false impression about how a product is more environmentally friendly. The term originated in the 1960s, in response to the hotel industry placing notices in hotel rooms asking guests to reuse their towels to save the environment. This did not have any substantial environmental impact, but the hotels enjoyed the benefit of lower laundry costs. Nowadays, we see many companies try to improve their reputation by boasting of their environmental efforts, but not actually making much of an impact. Greenwashing is also frequently used to sell products. In fact, the environmental marketing firm TerraChoice has created a list of "The Six Sins of Greenwashing" that explain this phenomenon:

1. The Sin of Hidden Trade Offs: When a product claims to be environmentally sound based on a single, narrow attribute, without paying attention to important environmental issues.





Example:

Paper products that boast of their recycled content or chlorine-free bleaching, while the company does not take into account manufacturing impacts such as air emissions, water emissions, and forestry impacts.

Solution:

Research the company to see what they have been doing to combat climate change and other environmental issues.

2. The Sin of No Proof: An environmental claim that cannot be proven by easily accessible supporting information, or by a reliable third-party certification.

Example:

Household lamps and lights that promote their energy efficiency without any supporting certification.

Solution:

Choose products that display their certification. If you need help finding eco-certified products, check out [Eco Labels or our Eco Living Guide](#).

3. The Sin of Vagueness: Poorly defined or extremely broad claims that have little actual meaning. They use buzzwords that are unregulated.

Examples:

"Chemical-free." Everything is made up of chemicals (water is a chemical!). The product should be specific about which chemicals they are free of.

"All Natural." Many dangerous things are natural (uranium, mercury and formaldehyde are all natural, and poisonous!).

"Green," "environmentally friendly," and "eco-conscious," are too vague. There should be elaboration on how exactly the products are green.

Solution:

Buy products that are specific in their claims (for example, phthalate-free rather than chemical-free).



4. The Sin of Irrelevance: Environmental claims that may be truthful but are unimportant and unhelpful, distracting the consumer from finding an actually greener option.

Example:

Products (usually insecticides, lubricants and disinfectants) claiming to be CFC-free. Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) are in fact a principal contributor to ozone depletion. However, CFCs have been banned for over 40 years, meaning there are no products that are manufactured with it.

Solution:

If you are not sure if an environmental claim is actually useful, research it.

5. The Sin of Lesser of Two Evils. Green claims that are true of the product, but distract the consumer from the greater environmental impacts of the product category as a whole. Environmental qualifiers such as "organic" or "green" are placed on products in which the entire product category is of questionable environmental value.

Example:

"Green" insecticides and herbicides.

Solution:

If a product is in its nature bad for the environment, buying a greener version of it is not very helpful.

6. The Sin of Fibbing: Outright false claims.

Example:

A beauty product that claims to be a paper bottle, but the interior container is plastic.

Solution:

This is the rarest "sin", but it is always best to research companies you buy from.



Resource

www.EcoLivingGuide.ca

References

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