



Beware of greenwashing: Educate yourself and purchase products that support a sustainable world

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It's not the latest paint technique. It's organizations attempting to appear more sustainable than they really are. Or, according to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, greenwashing is, "...disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image."

So, how much greenwashing is going on?

TerraChoice, an environmental marketing company, conducted a study which found that almost all of the environmental claims made for consumer products are false or misleading.

As an interior designer, I frequently meet with product representatives, and it has been my experience that the amount of disinformation and lack of information is alarming. With interest in sustainable design continuing to climb, manufacturers are striving to clean up their image and present themselves in the best possible light. Some of their claims are true, and some aren't. The gray areas are endless and there is no perfectly sustainable manufactured product yet. However, some products and manufacturers are much better than others, and arming yourself with information is the only path to making that judgment call.

What is a green, sustainable product?

Before you can recognize greenwashing, you should have a working definition of a green, sustainable product.

The Sustainable Products Corporation believes that, "Sustainable products are those products providing environmental, social and economic benefits while protecting public health, welfare, and environment over their full commercial cycle, from the extraction of raw materials to final disposition."

And, Vivian Loftness, FAIA, Advanced Building Systems Integration Consortium, Carnegie Mellon, states that, "Green chemistry is the foundation of our desire to replace design that does no harm with restorative and regenerative design."

Both of these definitions are extremely ambitious. Imagine manufacturers and products that are restorative and regenerative.

Benefiting and Protecting the Environment

In beginning to understand how a product can accomplish this goal, let's start with product design. Has it been designed to be sustainable? Some sustainable design strategies include:

- * Designing for Deconstruction: A multi-component product, such as a chair, can be deconstructed into its component parts at the end of its useful life. Then, those different materials can be recycled, such as fabric, plastic, metal, etc.
- * Modular: If a product is modular, such as carpet tile, a small portion of an installation can be removed and replaced when it becomes unusable. This design strategy helps keep material in

buildings longer, and sends less material to the landfill.

- * Durable long life: Quality products need replacing less often, again avoiding more frequent trips to the landfill.

Once a product has been designed, the next focus is the extraction of raw materials. Sustainable strategies include:

- * Renewable and rapidly renewable raw materials, preventing depletion of finite resources.
- * Raw materials extracted within close proximity of the manufacturer, resulting in less fuel burned and less transportation pollution created.
- * Recycled raw materials, again reducing depletion of resources.
- * Certified wood products from sustainably managed forests, resulting in continually productive forests which benefit the planet in many ways, including CO2 sequestration, soil erosion prevention and oxygen production.

The manufacturing process is the next piece of the sustainable product puzzle. Sustainable manufacturers will practice:

- * Water pollution prevention and water use reduction,
- * Air pollution prevention,
- * Energy use reduction, and use of renewable energy.

Then there's the waste/recycling/disposal issues:

- * Waste reduction plan
- * Product packaging reduction
- * "Take-back" program, where the manufacturer will take-back a product at the end of its useful life and recycle it back into a new product.

Benefiting and Protecting Society

Sustainable manufacturers address human health and social equity problems created by the manufacturing process and products.

Human health problems include exposures to toxins, not only by employees in the manufacturing process, but also by the general public when those products are put into use. A recent example is the exposure to high levels of formaldehyde off-gassing in the emergency trailers occupied by victims of Hurricane Katrina. There were reports of a significant number of respiratory problems experienced by trailer occupants. According to the National Institutes of Health, there is no known safe level of exposure to formaldehyde.

And, we don't have to look too hard to find examples of social equity problems created by manufacturers who close a factory, leaving behind significant unemployment, only to reopen in a developing nation which may not have laws against child labor, sub-par wages or neglecting their employees safety.

Benefiting and Protecting the Economy

The most radical sustainability advocate does not want to see the economy collapse. "Profit" is not a four letter word - it's all in the way you earn it.

Sustainable processes and products can not only create a road to prosperity for manufacturers, but can also provide cost savings for those who purchase them. For manufacturers, many of the sustainable strategies will save them money, such as energy use reduction and reduction of fines for polluting. And, since the green revolution continues to gain momentum, research and development of new sustainable products, which are increasingly in demand, will give them the market edge.

For the purchasers of products, the trick is to look at the life cycle cost instead of the initial cost. It

may have a very low initial purchase price, but will it last? How long until it has to be replaced? And, how much maintenance does it need? When you look at the big picture, a quality product will actually cost less. And, there is a correlation between sustainable products and quality products. You usually get what you pay for.

Greenwashing Clues

Now that you have an idea of just how complicated it is to understand what makes a product green, here's a list of clues that may indicate greenwashing tactics are at work.

Misleading Ad Campaigns

Seen a lot of products sitting in flowered meadows recently? How about products illustrated in a green color? Or, products being kissed by butterflies? While these advertising techniques provide the appearance of environmental sensitivity, they say nothing about whether the product is actually sustainable.

Self-Certification

Manufacturers of similar products frequently band together into an organization that may be called an "institute," when, in reality, they are a trade association. Trade associations exist to promote the members products in many ways. Some of these "institutes" have created their own "green label," to tout the greenness of their products. Some of their claims are true, some are misleading, and some are not true at all.

Vague Claims

How many times have you seen the term "all natural?" What does that mean? Poison ivy is "all natural" but it's certainly not good for human health. How about "alternative materials?" What does that mean? Vague claims may be a clue that the manufacturer is trying to hide something.

A One-Hit Wonder

A product may have one attribute that is sustainable, but many other attributes that are very detrimental. In a world of trade-offs, all attributes of a product need to be considered.

Use of the LEED Trademark and/or the USGCB Logo

I've had many reps in my office telling me that their product will "earn a LEED point." That simply is not true. A product can "contribute toward a LEED point" but no product will earn one.

I've also heard "this is a LEED certified product." Again, not true. LEED does not certify any products.

Then there's the use of the USGCB logo on product literature. This misleads people into thinking that the USGBC endorses the product. The USGBC does not endorse any product. It is acceptable for a manufacturer to use the logo in conjunction with the word "member." Communicating that they are a member of the USGBC is a much different message, and one that brings a positive consideration from me.

Defeating Greenwashing

There's plenty of resources on the internet. Check out The Green Life website from the Sierra Club, SourceWatch.org which is a wiki, and The Green Guide from National Geographic for starters.

In conclusion, my best advice is to educate yourself and purchase products that support a sustainable world. Every time you open your wallet, you're telling the manufacturer to make more of that product. And, if you are purchasing sustainable products, that will drive the market toward sustainability. Each one of us can make a difference.

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