



PART II

Green-Wise, not Green-Washed

In the first installment of "Green-Wise, Not Green-Washed," green washing was defined along with an outline of the steps the Federal Trade Commission is taking to curtail deceptive "green" marketing. Also highlighted was how the confusion created by the existing 350 "eco-labels" makes it difficult for consumers to make informed purchasing decisions. This installment examines "green" certifications and eco-labels as well as resources for searching for products with authentic green attributes.

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Studies show consumers want to purchase products that are safe and reliable not only for them but for the environment and they prefer to do business with companies that are committed to protecting the global environment. As demand for green products continues to grow, manufacturers will naturally be looking for certifications or seals of approval to help them differentiate their products from competitors' products while consumers will be looking for a means of establishing a baseline of confidence for their purchasing decisions. So how does one differentiate between a genuine "green" product and snake oil?

An environmental certification is a

documented process whereby an authorized entity such as a government agency, not-for-profit organization or a private company evaluates a product, process, structure or organization as meeting a set of verifiable standardized environmental criteria that is then recognized by approved use of a certification logo or acronym. A seal (also referred to as an eco-label) is a visual identifier, either by the use of color or graphics, on a product, service, facility, structure or organization, the approved use of which confirms that a product or service has met specific social or environmental standards.

Certifications and seals are not new; there are just more of them today than

ever before. For more than a hundred years, Underwriters Laboratories (UL) has been conducting product safety testing and certification on a wide variety of consumer products while the Good Housekeeping Seal has allowed product manufacturers that meet their high standard of product quality and reliability to apply the Good Housekeeping Seal to their products.

Neither of these programs addresses environmental product attributes. However, UL recently established UL Environment, which offers independent validation of green claims, product certification, training, advisory services and standards development. The end goal is to provide clarity on what may or

may not be a sustainable product and to help industry move from a self-declaration model of environmental claims to one of independent third-party claims validation and certification. The Good Housekeeping Seal recently launched the Green Good Housekeeping Seal, which is intended to signify to consumers that a product is environmentally sound with respect to the manner in which it is manufactured, distributed, maintained and used, and

therefore is deemed to be healthier and safer for people and better for the environment.

Recognizing there are no perfect green products and that green products can come out of nongreen facilities (and vice versa), consumers need to accept there is no perfect certification or eco-label either. However, the following are three primary criteria to consider when selecting products based on their environmental certifications or eco-labels:

- Was the certification/eco-label created by an independent third party, a trade association whose dues-paying members receive the exclusive benefit of the certification/seal or by a single company whose product sports the label? Referencing the links below or performing a quick online search will tell you how legitimate a certification or eco-label is by the sheer number of times it pops up in the search and by the entities that recognize it.

- Does the certification/eco-label address a single or multiple product attributes? For example, the FSC certification only pertains to wood products (sustainable forest practices and chain of custody), making it a single-attribute certification.

GreenGuard certifies a wide variety of consumer products with specific focus on chemical toxicity and the impact on indoor air quality under a multi-attribute certification. Multi-attribute certifications often go beyond the material component and manufacturing processes of a product to include social policy such as child labor and community involvement.

- Does the certification process include a life cycle analysis — the process of analyzing a product from raw material extraction, through manufacturing and distribution all the way to disposal at the end of its useful life? (See additional resources below for free databases that include product LCA.)

An additional resource for measuring green product attributes is the Environmental Product Declarations (EPD). EPDs are common in Europe but are just catching on in the United States and represent a published “score card” of a product’s environmental and health information and is unrelated to a certification or eco-label program. The transparency of these score cards allows consumers to select products based on their own personal criteria.

Is it worth the effort to seek out legitimate sustainable products and services? This depends on personal consuming goals. However, no one wants to waste their money. So with a little bit of

effort and education, consumers can now quickly and easily identify best-of-class green products and services for their hard earned dollar.

Third Party Certifications

Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star (1992) and WaterSense (2006) programs provide third-party certification of appliances and plumbing fixtures, respectively, and more recently have established third-party certification for newly constructed homes. The Energy Star for Homes program focuses on energy efficiency (20-30 percent more efficient than a home built to 2006 codes) while WaterSense focuses on water conservation (20 percent more efficient than 2006 codes). www.epa.gov

Established in 1989, Green Seal is a nonprofit engaged in the development of life cycle-based sustainability standards and third-party certifications for a wide variety of consumer products (personal hygiene, cleaning, building products and more), services and companies. www.greenseal.org

Since 2001 the GREENGUARD Environmental Institute has been certifying a wide variety of consumer and commercial products such as building materials, medical devices, signage and more. GREENGUARD Certified products must meet stringent requirements for chemical emissions and toxicity. Products undergo both annual recertification and quarterly quality monitoring tests to keep this credential. www.greenguard.org (Note: GREENGUARD Environmental Institute was acquired by UL in 2011.)

ICC Evaluation Services launched the SAVE (Sustainable Attribute Verification Evaluation) program in 2008. ICC Evaluation Services, a nonprofit subsidiary of the International Code Council known for its work in verifying code compliance for innovative building products, developed the SAVE program to verify a wide variety of sustainable attributes in construction materials. www.icc-es.org

Second Party Certifications

The Kitchen Cabinet Manufacturers Association, a professional trade association representing residential

cabinet manufacturers, launched the association's Environmental Stewardship Program in 2006. This certification is not third-party certified, and both participation and compliance is voluntary (on the honor system). The certification program is multi-attribute and includes product, business operations and a social component that requires participants to make a difference in their communities. www.greencabinetsource.org

The Natural Products Association, founded in 1936, is a nonprofit trade association representing suppliers and retailers of natural products. The NPA developed a Natural Standard and Certification program for home care and personal care products. Members whose products meet the standards for natural ingredients, no animal testing, environmental and health safety as well as biodegradable ingredients and environmentally sensitive packaging can sport the association's eco-label. www.npainfo.org

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For consumers, the FTC has issued two brochures, "Sorting out 'Green' Advertising Claims" (www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/alerts/alt049.shtm) and "Eco-Speak: A User's Guide to the Language of Recycling" (<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/alerts/alt049.shtm>).

The "Green Washing Index" from EnviroMedia Social Marketing and the University of Oregon ranks a variety of print and media advertisements on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being the most authentic green product or service and 5 being a flagrant misrepresentation of attributes. www.greenwashingindex.com

Green Product LLC offers a free online database of sustainable products that have been verified as being legitimate generators of LEED, LEED for Home or NAHB Standard certification points. Listed companies pay a fee to be included on this site. (Note: There are no LEED or Standard certified products. The USGBC certifies commercial and residential structures as well as design-build professionals. Standard certifies commercial and residential structures only.) www.greenerproduct.com/default.aspx

BPMSelect.com is a building product search engine developed specifically for AEC professionals. Introduced by The Blue Book Building and Construction Network, BPM Select enables searching, specifying and sourcing building products within a targeted database of more than 12,000 manufacturer websites. www.bpmselect.com