

# Greenwash

When the green  
is just veneer

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**Greenwash – verb:** the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service.

Increasingly, consumers are voting for environmental sustainability with their dollars. For instance, the North American organic sector is said to be growing by 20 percent a year and the market for healthy, eco-friendly products has been estimated now to be worth over \$200 billion annually in the U.S. alone. Many consumers are willing to pay significantly more for products branded “natural” or “organic,” believing them to be of superior quality and safer for themselves and for the environment. Businesses, both large and small, are obliging with an ever-expanding selection of products catering to this new eco-sensibility. In addition to fattening their bottom lines by providing a competitive edge with this growing number of green consumers, environmental performance has become a point of social responsibility for many corporations.

However, as green moves beyond niche market status and becomes the color of choice for mass merchandisers, not all products and companies are as environmentally responsible as they advertise themselves to be. Hence, the term “greenwashing,” which was coined as far back as the 1970s by environmental activists to describe advertising by corporations meant to portray them as environmentally responsible in order to mask environmental wrongdoings. The U.S.-based watchdog group CorpWatch defines greenwash as “the phenomena of socially and environmentally destructive corporations, attempting to preserve and expand their markets or power by posing as friends of the environment.” Former Madison Avenue advertising executive Jerry Mander (best known for his 1977 book *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*) called it “ecopornography” in a 1972 article in *Communications and Arts Magazine*. The term “greenwashing” is now used to describe a wide range of attempts by businesses to attract environmentally aware consumers, including the creation of organizations, celebrity endorsements, event sponsorship and the use of meaningless and unverifiable words like “natural,” “green,” “eco-friendly,” “non-toxic” and “chemical-free” on labels and packaging. Even the word “organic” is meaningless unless it is backed up by certification.

The practice is widespread. In the spring of 2007, Ottawa-based TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc. sent research teams into six big box stores with instructions to record the details of every product-based environmental claim they observed. After recording 1,753 environmental claims on 1,018 products, they tested the claims against current best practices in environmental marketing. The sources for these best practices include the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Consumers Union and the Canadian Consumer Affairs Branch. Then they studied the resulting list of false or misleading claims for patterns and lessons, distilling

them into the “Six Sins of Greenwashing.” Of the 1,018 products that made environmental claims, all but one committed at least one of the Six Sins.

Some examples of this sort of questionable marketing include golf courses that bill themselves as “natural” and “green” in spite of heavy pesticide use and office equipment that is promoted as energy-efficient in spite of high hazardous material content, indoor air quality issues or incompatibility with recycled paper or remanufactured toner cartridges.

Then there are Frito Lay’s “Eco-Friendly Factory, Low-Guilt Potato Chips,” or at least that’s how the PepsiCo subsidiary promoted the pesticide sprayed, deep fried products of its recent green factory retrofit in a press release.

One of the many new so-called “green” magazines recently touted, in an advertorial feature, paper towels made from recycled paper and chlorine-free bleach. But this is an inherently non-green and unnecessary product, easily replaced by reusable cloth towels or, better yet, a piece of cloth that has outlived its original purpose as clothing or bedding.

A classic example of greenwashing is described in an article on the [businessethics.ca](http://businessethics.ca) website by Melissa Whellams, a corporate social responsibility advisor with Canadian Business for Social Responsibility (CBSR) and Chris MacDonald, a business ethics professor at St. Mary’s University in Halifax. They cite an advertisement that appeared in *National Geographic* magazine in 2004, in which Ford Motor Company tried to convince readers of its commitment to the environment by announcing the launch of the Escape Hybrid SUV and the remodeling of a factory. The ad read, “Green vehicles. Cleaner factories. It’s the right road for our company, and we’re well underway.” Whellams and MacDonald note that Ford failed to tell readers that it only planned to produce 20,000 of its Hybrid SUVs per year, while continuing to produce almost 80,000 F-series trucks per month. “Moreover,” they write, “just prior to the campaign’s release, the Environmental Protection Agency announced that Ford had the worst fleet wide fuel

economy of all major automakers. Ford’s failure to live up to its environmentally friendly image earned the company first prize among America’s top ten worst greenwashers of the year.”

Unfortunately, Ford got away with that and continued on with the green paint. In January 2006, *Bloomberg* described a Ford ad claiming it was “dramatically ramping up its commitment” to more environmentally friendly cars. *Bloomberg* noted that in 2004 Ford had joined other automakers in suing to block a California law that would limit emissions of greenhouse gases. Richard Blumenthal, Connecticut’s attorney general, was quoted as calling some of Ford’s claims “questionable,” telling *Bloomberg*, “They’re definitely exploiting the fashion of environmentally friendly vehicles.”

Another blatant and monumental instance of greenwashing that has duped some people – including much of the mainstream media – is the current attempt to paint nuclear power as environmentally friendly. A TV commercial aired by the Nuclear Energy Institute (NEI), the nuclear industry trade group, states: “Nuclear power plants don’t emit greenhouse gases, so they protect our environment.” What is left unmentioned, of course, are the greenhouse gas emissions involved with uranium mining, milling, enrichment and fuel fabrication, not to mention the unsolved problem of how to dispose of radioactive waste.

The rapid-growing natural food and personal care products industry is another one that is being outed for excessive greenwashing.

A study released earlier this year found a carcinogen in a number of leading so-called “natural” personal care products. Commissioned by the watchdog group Organic Consumers Association (OCA) and overseen by environmental health consumer advocate David Steinman, the study analyzed leading “natural” and “organic” brand shampoos, body washes, lotions and other personal care products. A reputable third-party laboratory known for rigorous testing and chain-of-custody protocols performed the testing.

Apparently, ethoxylation, a

cheap short-cut companies use to provide mildness to harsh ingredients, requires the use of the cancer-causing petrochemical Ethylene Oxide, which generates 1,4-Dioxane as a by-product. 1,4-Dioxane is designated by the State of California to cause cancer, is suspected as a kidney-, neuro- and respiratory-toxicant, among others and is a leading groundwater contaminant. It is normally found in traditional soaps and shampoos, but the OCA report has jolted the natural products industry.

Some of the well-known brands found by the OCA study to contain 1,4-Dioxane included JASON Pure Natural & Organic, Giovanni Organic Cosmetics, Kiss My Face, Nature’s Gate Organics and Whole Food’s house brand 365. None of the brands containing the carcinogen bore the USDA organic label. The biggest offenders were the “natural” dish detergents.

Both the OCA and Steinman called for misleadingly labeled brands that include ethoxylate ingredients or otherwise utilize petrochemicals to drop all organic claims from their branding and labeling.

Further, the OCA has given the companies until September 1 to remove all “organic” branding and labeling from their packaging under threat of a lawsuit accusing them of false and deceptive advertising and unfair and unlawful business practice under California law.

Meanwhile, to avoid 1,4-Dioxane, the OCA urges consumers to search ingredient lists for indications of ethoxylation including: “myreth,” “oleth,” “laureth,” “ceteareth,” any other “eth,” “PEG,” “polyethylene,” “polyethylene glycol,” “polyoxyethylene” or “oxynol” in ingredient names. In general, the OCA urges consumers to avoid products with unpronounceable ingredients.



Reading labels is good advice. That way, you can try to avoid greenwashing by seeking products that are certified to meet legitimate environmental standards by an independent third party. (See next page's sidebar for a list.)

But unfortunately, even certification isn't always trustworthy. Aurora Dairy Corporation, based in Boulder, Colorado, has been accused by the USDA of willfully violating federal organic law after a formal complaint was lodged by the Cornucopia Institute, a non-profit farm policy research group. Aurora and grocery retailers Wal-Mart, Costco, Target, Safeway and Wild Oats are the subject of class action lawsuits citing consumer fraud for marketing suspect organic milk.

Independent investigators at the USDA concluded that Aurora, with \$100 million in annual sales from five dairy facilities in Colorado and Texas, each milking thousands of cows, had 14 "willful" violations of federal organic regulations. Aurora was confining cows to factory farm-style pens and sheds in feedlots rather than grazing the animals as the federal law requires. Furthermore, Aurora brought conventional animals into their organic milking operation in a manner prohibited by the U.S. government's Organic Food Production Act.

Cornucopia points out that Aurora is a "horrible aberration." In a scorecard published last year and available on its website [www.cornucopia.org](http://www.cornucopia.org), the organization rates over 90 percent of organic name-brand dairy products as truly subscribing to the letter and spirit of the law.

These green marketing tactics have caught the eye of the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, which has recently been looking at both advertising and packaging claims, as well as examining the booming business of selling carbon offsets, which are billed as a way to balance the greenhouse gas emissions created by activities like excessive computer or paper usage or air travel, by supporting tree planting or renewable energy projects. Deborah Platt Majoras, chairwoman of the FTC, has said that with the tremendous growth in the field, there is potential for abuse of the public's trust and that the commission is concerned that some green marketing assertions are not substantiated.

That erosion of trust breeds cynicism – or even a backlash. Firms spending money on innovation to create green products can lose market share to money-saving greenwashers and due to consumer cynicism. Another danger is that consumers could be lulled into a false sense of complacency when surrounded with a sea of green, thinking the environmental problem is solved merely by buying some dish detergent with a leaf on the label. A proliferation of greenwashing can also fool regulation-shy governments into shirking their duty because the corporate sector appears to be self-regulating.

However, there are no perfect products and everything we do has an impact. Because the temptation to greenwash can be seen as a necessary part of an economy's adjustment to a new, more sustainable mode, one person's greenwash is another person's market-driven approach to solving global warming.

And that's the rationalization used by the increasing number of non-profit organizations partnering with corporations: They believe that they can then have a larger impact than if they struggled along on their own.

In the U.S., the Climate Action Partnership is one example of such a partnership between conglomerates like BP America, Duke Energy, DuPont, General Electric and PG&E with groups like Environmental Defense and the Natural Resources Defense Council.

In recent years, a number of Canadian conservation groups, including the World Wildlife Fund, the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society and the Canadian Boreal Initiative, have received funding from Pew Family Charitable Trusts, set up by the same family that used to control the Alberta Tar Sands giant Suncor.

In what may be the most controversial of these liaisons, one of the least green companies – The Clorox Company, which was named the U.S.'s most chemically dangerous by the Public Interest Research Group – has teamed up with the Sierra Club, self-described as the nation's oldest, largest and most effective environmental organization. Last December, the Sierra Club's board voted to allow Clorox to use its name and logo to market a new line of non-chlorinated

cleaning products called "Green Works." In return, Clorox Company will pay Sierra Club an undisclosed but "substantial" fee, based partly on product sales. The deal angered and embittered Club members country-wide. This Spring, the national board took the unprecedented action of removing the leaders of the Club's 35,000-member Florida chapter and suspending the Chapter for four years. The chapter leaders had been highly critical of the agreement.

No doubt these organizations need the money and these liaisons help take their messages to the masses. But they must be vigilant if the funding isn't to compromise the quality or believability of the message. And the fact remains that the corporations are benefitting from branding themselves as green when they're often far from that. And that, like all greenwashing, is deceptive. **-NL-**

## Learn More

EcoLogo - [www.ecologo.org](http://www.ecologo.org)

Energy Star Program - [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov)

Green-e - [www.green-e.org](http://www.green-e.org)

Chlorine Free Products Association - [www.chlorinefreeproducts.org](http://www.chlorinefreeproducts.org)

Green Seal - [www.greenseal.org](http://www.greenseal.org)

Forest Stewardship Council - [www.fsc.org](http://www.fsc.org)

Green Guard - [www.greenguard.org](http://www.greenguard.org)

Center for Media & Democracy  
SourceWatch Encyclopedia  
[www.sourcewatch.org](http://www.sourcewatch.org)

*The Six Sins of Greenwashing*  
TerraChoice Environmental Marketing  
[www.terrachoice.com](http://www.terrachoice.com)

OCA's "Coming Clean" Campaign  
[www.organicconsumers.org/bodycare/](http://www.organicconsumers.org/bodycare/)

Campaign for Safe Cosmetics  
[www.safecosmetics.org](http://www.safecosmetics.org)

Greenpeace Consumer Guides  
[www.greenpeace.org](http://www.greenpeace.org)

Take Greenwash to the Cleaners  
[www.thegreenlifeonline.org](http://www.thegreenlifeonline.org)

*Safe Trip to Eden* by David Steinman  
(Perseus Books 2007)

*Greenwash: The Reality Behind Corporate Environmentalism* by Jed Greer, Kenny Bruno (Apex Press, 1997)

*Earth for Sale: Reclaiming Ecology in the Age of Corporate Greenwash* by Brian Tokar (South End Press, 1997)

