

“Green Confusion”

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Today's consumer is more concerned than ever before about the environment. Climate change, global warming and carbon emissions are all in the back of people's minds. Politicians, celebrities and even religious leaders are all promoting being environmentally friendly and reducing our carbon footprints. Every day the consumer is faced with a myriad of choices concerning which products to buy and which products will have the least impact on the environment. These products are commonly known as green products. Green products are being offered by companies and large corporations to capture the attention of customers and to establish themselves in the green marketplace.

Consumers are the driving force behind the struggling U.S. economy. This year alone American consumers will spend an estimated \$500 billion dollars on products that claim to be green, twice as much as they spent in 2007. Consumer spending is the single most important sector of the economy making up about two-thirds of the \$14 trillion dollar U.S. gross domestic product. Today consumers concerned about the environment are buying more fuel efficient vehicles and a variety of other so-called green products (Weeks). Companies recognize the trend in spending and are launching marketing campaigns to appeal to consumers.

The green movement is a marketing gimmick aimed at U.S. consumers. Claims made by companies about green products are often overstated, misleading and confusing. Marketing of green products actually diverts consumers from making decisions with real and actual benefits for the environment. Companies and large corporations are more concerned with making money than with saving the environment.

One of the problems with so-called green products is what experts call greenwashing. In their book *Green*, Jane and Michael Hoffman describe the term greenwashing:

Greenwashing is what happens when a hopeful public eager to behave responsibly about the environment is presented with evidence that makes an industry or a politician seem friendly to the environment when, in fact, the industry or the politician is not as wholly amicable as it or he may be. Greenwashing is a marketing strategy, and one that the public might grow more susceptible to as our need for energy expands. (67)

“Greenwashing or making misleading environmental claims about a company or product, is becoming more pervasive as companies bring new green products to market” (Weeks).

Companies are all too eager to make claims about their products being green. Some of these claims prompted an independent testing firm, Auto Express UK to run tests on some vehicles claiming to have low-carbon outputs. “The test revealed that several vehicles perform much worse in the real world than their manufacturers claim” (Niedermeyer). Niedermeyer also goes on to describe the claims by manufacturers on carbon output and fuel efficiency as “universally overestimated” and “hyped in marketing efforts.” Terra Choice, an environmental marketing organization reviewed a total of 1,108 products making environmental claims and found that all but one contained bad information or false claims (Weeks).

To add to the confusion surrounding green products and the claims made by manufacturers, the U.S. government is offering tax credits and rebates to consumers who buy products approved by the Energy Star program. The tax incentives were created to help promote environmentally responsible decisions by consumers (NPR). Energy Star is a joint government program of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Energy, which claims to be “helping us all save money and protect the environment through energy efficient products and practices” (United). The Energy Star label is something that consumers

identify with and trust for accurate information about products. Recently, however, the Energy Star program was reported to have serious flaws in both the way they approve products and in the verification of claims made by manufactures. According to Consumer Reports, two of the refrigerators it tested used “50 percent more energy” and two more used “39 percent and 33 percent more energy” than their Energy Star labels claimed (qtd. in NPR). The Energy Star program was recently investigated by the Government Accountability Office. The office submitted 20 “completely bogus products” and 15 out of the 20 received Energy Star certification. One of the products submitted, approved and certified was a “gasoline-powered alarm clock” (NPR).

The problem with the emergence of green markets is the need for regulation on claims made by manufacturers. There is little or no regulation on these claims. The Federal Trade Commission is looking into environmental claims made by companies and has acted against 37 companies for making false claims about their products. As of now, labels listing specifics about environmental impact are completely voluntary and left up to the buyer to decipher (Ball). Andrew Benett and Greg Welch describe claiming to be green as “too easy” and go on to say that with all the misuse and abuse of labeling and marketing that the term green “can mean virtually anything” and that it will “eventually mean absolutely nothing.” The green movement is now being described as the green market. There is still no clear definition of a green business. Many U.S. corporations are looking to go green to appeal to the growing market (Weeks).

Environmental labeling does not take into account how the products will be used or misused and for that reason are not very accurate. The labels can be confusing for consumers since there is no standard for measuring a products environmental friendliness. Some labels cover shipping and storage, while some are aimed at the use of toxic chemicals and disposal.

This opens up a number of problems for consumers and leaves many questions to be asked about the green claims (Ball). When asked about labeling standards, Terra Choice Vice President Scot Case replied, “This is unexplored territory, so marketers may be stretching the truth unintentionally. The sudden interest in green just caught a lot of people off guard, and marketers were busy slapping buzzwords on packaging” (qtd. in Weeks).

The problem with all of the marketing, labeling and misleading information is that it steers consumers away from making decisions that will actually help the environment and lower their impact on carbon emissions. “Even if green marketing delivers on its pledges, many environmentalists say that sustainability is not a matter of buying green but of buying less” (Weeks). Environmentalists agree that the most significant action that a consumer can do is to join efforts in putting pressure on governments and corporations to change their policies. The consumer making voluntary choices about what to buy can actually have negative impacts on the environment (Billitteri). Andrew Szasz, a sociologist at the University of California describes green consumerism:

A lot of people get environmentally conscious enough to get worried. Then they go out and buy everything green that they can afford and move on to something else. Pressure from social movements to take toxic substances out of our water and air will create more progress than individual consumer actions. (qtd. in Weeks)

Mike Tidwell, director of the Chesapeake Climate Action Network, warns consumers about making misdirected choices about buying green. He writes that he would rather see individuals making telephone calls to their state senators than filling up their driveways and homes with green products (Billitteri). Buying green products is important, but can also divert consumers

away from doing things that would have a much bigger impact on saving the planet.

Large corporations and businesses offering green products are more concerned with making money than they are about the environment. Take for example, Toyota, the world's largest automobile manufacturer. Toyota has developed a reputation as an environmentally friendly company by producing the Toyota Prius, a hybrid vehicle that gets 50 miles-per-gallon. Although the company is known for being green, they still oppose tougher standards on fuel economy. They joined the U.S. automakers to lobby against the mileage requirements in the U.S. Senate version of the draft energy bill. The company opposes the bill because they have an interest in producing so called "gas-guzzlers" (Friedman).

The green market is fast growing and has big profit potential. One industry benefiting from the green movement is trade shows. Trade shows are not usually considered green or environmentally friendly, but are doing well showcasing green products and companies. Bob Peters, who is the director of earthNOW expo and muscle car enthusiast, admits he is "no green guy" (qtd. in Hsu). He also admits that he is just in the business to make money and thought that was the whole idea of getting involved in the green movement (Hsu). The green trend is just becoming too big for companies to ignore and many are taking advantage of the opportunity. Deborah Sexton, chief executive of the Professional Convention Management Assn., had this to say about the green movement: "Like any other industry, people will try to hop on the gravy train" and also, "any business that is not taking this trend seriously is making a terrible mistake" (qtd. in Hsu).

As consumers we are aware of the problems our planet is facing, there is just some confusion about what exactly to do about it. Many environmentalist and consumer advocates argue that the key to conservation is in buying green products manufactured with minimal

environmental impacts (Weeks). Bill Burtis, communications manager for Clean Air-Cool Planet, said in an interview, “Individual actions can make a significant difference” (qtd. in Billitteri). Yes it is true that buying green products can benefit the environment. The problem is that the average consumer is not informed enough to know which products are actually environmentally friendly and which aren’t. Until green claims are regulated and labeling standardized, the confusion over green products will continue. While there are definitely green products that have some benefit, the truth is that there are many out there that claim to, but don’t. “Consumers also must figure out which actions actually help the environment and which only seem to” (Billitteri). Deciphering green labeling claims can be a daunting task. Most environmental advocates agree that change needs to come from government regulation and corporate policy.

Consumers concern about the environment and willingness to do the right thing is being targeted by green marketing claims. The green movement is growing in popularity and there are too many companies cashing in on the trend. The claims made by companies about their products eco-friendliness are confusing and misleading. Buying green products diverts people from doing things that will actually benefit the environment. Large companies and corporations are in business to make money and not to save the planet. It is up to the consumer to demand more government regulation and consumer protection with regards to green marketing. Buyer beware, the green movement is not everything it claims to be.

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