

Study raises red flag over 'green' claims

October 26 2010, By Wendy Koch

More than 95 percent of consumer products marketed as "green," including all toys surveyed, make misleading or inaccurate claims, says a report Tuesday.

The number of products claiming to be green increased 73 percent since 2009, according to a survey by TerraChoice, an Ottawa-based marketing firm owned mostly by Underwriters Laboratory of Canada. The UL network does independent product testing and certification.

"The biggest sin is making claims without any proof," says Scot Case of UL Environment, adding companies want consumers to "just trust them." The report finds "vagueness" is the second-leading problem (a [shampoo](#) claimed it was "mother-earth approved") in "greenwashing" -- a term that refers to misleading green claims.

The report comes as the [Federal Trade Commission](#) is proposing stricter advertising rules. In updating its Green Guides, last revised in 1998, it warns companies not to make blanket claims such as "eco-friendly" or cite unqualified certifications (a paper towel product once claimed it "fights [global warming](#)").

"Consumers should look for more specificity," says James Kohm of FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection. He says general claims are difficult to prove.

For its "Sins of Greenwashing" report, TerraChoice visited 34 stores in the U.S. and Canada from March to May and surveyed 5,296 products

that make environmental claims. The products included toys, baby care items, building materials, housewares, consumer electronics and health goods.

A skyrocketing share of products claim to be free of phthalates, chemicals used to make plastics, and [BPA](#) or bisphenol A, an estrogen-like chemical.

The report also found:

- A small but rising share of products make accurate green claims -- 4.5 percent this year, up from 2 percent in 2009 and 1 percent in 2007, when the first survey was done.
- "Big box" retailers are more apt to sell products with accurate claims than boutique stores. They may have more influence on their suppliers, Case says.
- Products such as building materials that have more experience in the green marketplace make fewer misleading claims than those such as toys and baby products that are new to it.

"Those in the environmental space for a while are learning from their mistakes," Case says.

The report shows progress, however slight, is occurring, says Thomas Lyon, director of the Erb Institute for Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan.

Still, he says the growing green marketplace is tricky for consumers.

"There are all these fake labels," Lyon says. "You still have to do your homework."

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