

UF College of Dentistry Green Team

Green Tips of the Month



August 2009

Don't give up YOUR green to greenwashers

Ever heard the term "greenwashing"? Even if you haven't, it's quite the marketing trend these days! A few examples:

Bottled water with "eco-friendly" packaging

You've seen the labels: Bottles with less plastic! Smaller labels mean fewer trees used! However, the fact remains that even 30-50% less plastic is still... a lot of plastic, only a small percentage of which is recycled. Tap water (filtered, if you don't like the taste) in a reusable water bottle is just as safe and portable, and much more affordable.

"Clean" coal

Coal-fired power plants are plentiful, relatively cheap and dirty. According to an [MIT study](#) (among other sources), they are a major contributor to air pollution, including carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, mercury, nitrogen oxide and particle pollution. Yet coal-industry organizations such as the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity (ACCCE) claim that technologies such as carbon sequestration (yet to be developed) can cut coal's carbon footprint. Even worse, they claim that coal is *already* "70% cleaner on the basis of regulated emissions per unit of energy produced." Dig a little deeper, and you discover that the 70% claim refers to a reduction in sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxides—*not* mercury, CO2 or any other nastiness.

Products that claim to be natural, biodegradable, eco-friendly, or green

These are all marketing buzzwords, but they are not regulated—which means that anyone can use them to describe anything! Their appeal is also emotional rather than rational. "Natural" is not necessarily good: as TerraChoice's "Seven Sins of Greenwashing" report points out, many poisons are natural. "Biodegradable" products have a hard time breaking down if they're thrown in landfills (where garbage is too tightly packed to biodegrade). And "eco-friendly" and "green" are pretty much meaningless.

What to do?

While it can be hard to know which claims have merit, there are a number of ways to help you separate the tree-huggers from the smoke-blowers:

- Independent certifications such as Green-e (renewable energy and carbon offsets), LEED (building construction) and Energy Star (appliances and electronics). Products must meet certain sustainability standards to qualify for these certifications – and using the word "eco" on the box isn't one of them.
- Government-regulated terms. For example, items labeled "organic" are required by the USDA to be "produced, processed, and certified to consistent national organic standards." [More information about USDA Organic certification](#)
- EnviroMedia Social Marketing's [Greenwashing Index](#) helpfully categorizes ads and products as "most authentic" (i.e., true claims of eco-friendliness) and "worst offenders" (greenwashers).
- TerraChoice's 2009 "[Seven Sins of Greenwashing](#)" report details some of the misleading practices companies engage in to create the impression that their products are environmentally friendly. These include making vague, unsubstantiated or simply false claims and casting a product as the "lesser of two evils."
- The [Good Guide](#) offers research-backed ratings on products that reflect their effects on human health, the environment, and society. Product categories include food, toys, cleaning products and personal care items. The guide also provides articles on environmental and health issues.