

# Environmentally Preferred Sourcing Program

## EPS Toolkit: Greenwashing

There are many green claims in the marketplace, but some are simply “greenwashing.” Greenwashing occurs when a company, government agency or nonprofit organization misleads the purchaser about their environmental practices or the environmental benefits of a product or service. Organizations are tempted to engage in greenwashing to increase sales, narrow the perceived “green” advantage of a rival, reduce staff turnover or make the company more attractive to investors.

### What is greenwashing?

Greenwash is a term used to describe the perception of consumers that a company is misleading them regarding the environmental practices of the company or the environmental benefits of a product or service. The term “green sheen” similarly describes organizations that attempt to appear that they are adopting practices beneficial to the environment.

Suburban New York environmentalist Jay Westerveld coined greenwashing in 1986, in an essay regarding the hotel industry's practice of placing green placards in each room, promoting reuse of guest-towels, ostensibly to “save the environment.” Westerveld noted that, in most cases, little or no waste-recycling effort was implemented by these institutions, due in part to the lack of cost-cutting affected by such practice.

The term is generally used when significantly more money or time is spent advertising being green rather than spending resources on environmentally sound practices. This is often portrayed by changing the name or label of a product, to give the feeling of nature — for example, putting an image of a forest on a bottle containing harmful chemicals.

## What you can do

### Establish clear specifications

Make sure you require bidders to provide specific proof of all claims in their bid response. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission has information on evaluating environmental claims on their [website](#).

### Request third-party certification standards

Third-party certification provides assurance that a product was independently tested and found to meet criteria, which verifiably reduces its negative environmental and health impacts. All certifying or labeling organizations provide lists of their certified products. Some will work with purchasers to review products and determine if a specific product meets a purchaser's particular criteria. View third-party [certification](#).

### Consult the greenwash detection kit

Greenpeace developed a greenwash detection kit that looks at four key areas:

- **Core business** — If a company's core (or main) business is based primarily on an activity that is identified as significantly contributing to environmental pollution or destruction, there is a strong presumption that any assertions that it supports environmentally sustainable development are greenwash.
- **Advertising practice** — The greenwash tag applies to corporations that use the media to make environmental claims about one or more of their cleaner products, while continuing “business as usual” practices that rely, for

example, on large amounts of natural capital, are energy intensive or inefficient, or that involve production and release of toxic chemicals.

- **Research and development (R&D)** — Here, the greenwash test is to what extent these budgets are allocated to developing practices that are more sustainable, or are simply reinforcing old, unsustainable practices. For example, a paper manufacturing corporation which spends most of its R&D budget on developing a closed-cycle production process that eliminates use of chlorine and avoids use of old growth forest as feedstock is moving in the right direction.
- **Environmental lobbying record** — Corporations that say one thing and do another are “greenwashers.” For example, a corporation that presents itself as in favor of pollution reduction loses all credibility if, at the same time, it actively lobbies against measures designed to reduce pollution.

### Understand the six sins of greenwashing

Terra Choice (the Environmental Choice organization) outlines six sins of greenwashing. They are:

- **The hidden trade-off** — emphasizes one environmental trait while not considering the impact of the entire product (for example, paper that is made from sustainably harvested trees)
- **No proof** — products or companies that claim they do (or do not do) something but offer no evidence to support claims (for example, personal care products that say they have not been tested on animals)
- **Vagueness** — uses unclear and unexplained marketing claims to paint a green picture (for example, products that are “chemical-free” or “eco-friendly” but don’t explain how)
- **Irrelevance** — claims that are truthful but are unimportant and unhelpful (for example, products that claim to be chlorofluorocarbon (CFC)-free — true but misleading because CFCs have been illegal since the 1980s)

- **Fibbing** — emphasizes claims that are simply false
- **Lesser of two evils** — emphasizes claims that may be true but mainly distract the consumer from greater environmental impacts (for example, organic tobacco)

### Spend some time on the internet

Take a look at the company’s website. Can you easily find information about its sustainable business practices? Does it have a comprehensive environmental story? Is there believable information to substantiate their green claims? Also search Google for the company name plus the word “environment.” While far from scientific, if there is a problem with the company’s track record, something will pop up.

There are also several credible sources on the internet about greenwashing, including:

- The **Greenwashing Index**, hosted by the University of Oregon, lets you see some current ad campaigns founded on greenwash.
- The Consumers Union developed a general eco-labeling website that reviews the basis for different labeling schemes and rates them as credible or lacking in substance.
- The **Unsuitablog**, a website devoted to exposing environmental hypocrisy and is updated with new examples of greenwash every few days. It also contains a short list of things to watch for.
- Websites like **SourceWatch** and **Corporate Watch**.

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The Vizient Environmentally Preferred Sourcing (EPS) Program offers members supply and service cost savings through more than 36,000 supplier agreements. EPS suppliers have verified EPS attributes and provide products that can support members’ sustainability objectives. This toolkit is a resource to help members create or enhance their sustainability programs.

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