

## Fools Green: *Corporate Greenwashing*

I try so hard to be good.

I try to give my greenbacks to the good guys, the companies that have made a commitment to not annihilating our planet at the speed of light. I earnestly peruse packaging and marketing for the keywords to green, like:

*Biodegradable. Organic. Environmentally Friendly. Recycled. Eco-safe. Earth smart. Natural.*

And I consider myself fairly savvy. Pretty cynical. Not paranoid, I don't think, (they are watching me, really!), but I try hard to be a careful consumer, doing my homework and taking marketing claims with a grain – sometimes a large one – of salt.

And I'm a fool. Before you feel too superior, so are you. We have been fooled together – casualties of slick marketers and a tactic that's grown as fast as the environmental movement: greenwashing.

It made not have made it yet to Merriam-Webster online, but greenwashing made it to that final arbiter of the English language, the Oxford English Dictionary, in 1999. So it's official.

What is it? The OED definition is “disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image.”

And in plain language? It's a shell game played by folks who want you to think that they're as committed to the environment as you are. It's a big stakes game: in a 1995 Roper Starch Worldwide annual poll it emerged that about three-quarters of Americans view themselves as environmentally active sympathetic, and according to the Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability (LOHAS) Journal this growing market represented \$226.8 billion in the U.S in 2000. That's a lot of dollars to be made!

So corporations have scrambled to doll themselves up for green consumers. Some have actually made sweeping commitments to sustainability, like Interface, Inc., one of the leading carpet manufacturers in the world. Under their visionary founder Ray Anderson, Interface has pledged to become the first environmentally restorative company in the world. They believe, and they're working to make it happen, that manufacturing companies can actually benefit the earth, rather than spit it up and chew it out.

But other companies have discovered the joys of the greenwash. Instead of actually doing anything to better the environment, they cynically twist the honorable intentions and desires of their customers by making use of warm and fuzzy (and sometimes brutally inaccurate) phrases like those above.

Some of their playing us for fools is done with small brushstrokes. For example, S.C. Johnson's new version of Raid made with pyrethrin, an insecticide made from flowers. Ahh, lovely, and warms the cockles of a green gardener's (or bug killer's, which begs some questions about the wisdom of killing insects, but that's another rant) heart. Problem is, pyrethrin accounts for .08% of its contents. The vast majority of it is a chemical cocktail of neurotoxic pesticides and their releasers, and so-called 'inert' ingredients, a mystery mixture that the company doesn't, by law, have to list.

And some times they paint with enormous brushes. My personal favorite comes from the lumber industry. Launched as a labeling program in 2002, the Sustainable Forestry Initiative tells consumers concerned about devastating timbering practices that they're buying from folks who have worried about the long-term health of our forests. The fly in the proverbial ointment here? The SFI is a self-created, self-appointed, self-governed, self-funded group developed by the American Forest and Paper Association – the most powerful timber trade association in the world. Not a particularly disinterested group!

Greenwashing, unfortunately, is growing with the same speed as environmental awareness, and it is up to us, the consumers, to find ways not be played the fool. It's maddening to think that we have to spend our limited time and energy reading between the lines from conniving marketers, but if we're going to stem the greenwash tide, we've got be vigilant, and prove to companies that it's easier, in the long run, to actually work to make the world better.

Here are some things that you can do to take off your fool's cap:

- Check out the Earthday Resources website. They're about to unveil their twelfth annual “Don't Be Fooled” Awards highlighting the previous year's top ten most egregious green washers.
- When you see ecological claims in advertising or on packaging, look past the symbols. Check out ingredient lists!
- If it sounds like scientific mumbo-jumbo, it's most likely to be the mumbo-jumbo without much science.
- Buy locally when you can, and don't buy stuff you don't need! Buying something that's earth-friendly that's extraneous defeats the purpose.
- Do your homework about who really is the arbiter of the designation.
- Support organizations that are working for greater corporate accountability.

*(Leigh Melander is a member of the Sustainability Council of Ventura County. You can find out more about their activities on their website, [www.sustainabilitycouncil.org](http://www.sustainabilitycouncil.org))*