

'Green' labels can confuse consumers

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Consumers face a new question in the store aisles these days: "Is this product really 'green'?"

Both new and established brands have adjusted their promotional material toward growing consumer interest in products that offer the promise of environmental stewardship. Such items provide consumers with new ways to reduce their environmental footprint through the purchase of goods that are made, used and/or disposed of more responsibly.

But the question of whether or not a green product really contributes to helping the environment does not offer an easy answer.

These days, we expect businesses to do more than simply comply with local, state and national environmental laws. We want businesses to be more considerate of natural resource use in addition to providing consumers with the opportunity to choose more environmentally friendly options when they're making purchases. Our growing expectations for businesses and their products may exceed the reality of what those businesses can practically achieve.

The word "green" is one of the most misused and misunderstood terms in marketing. It is both a color with emotional appeal and an intention that is for the most part unregulated with respect to how it is represented.

For the sake of simplicity, it helps to narrow the use of "green" to its basic tenet — to effectively combine the goals of conservation and development. This allows us to shift our original question from one of "Is it green?" to a more appreciable objective: "How green is it?"

Certain green products demonstrate attributes that can't be easily falsified (e.g. lead-free, energy-efficient lighting or hybrid cars). Other products represent more of a leap of faith for the consumer, where conservation can only be promised rather than experienced. Many products in this category are governed by a growing number of certification schemes that are independently audited (such as USDA organic and the environmental management standard ISO 14001).

For the most part, such schemes may be more promising than non-audited claims, yet not all are clearly and independently verified. In 2008, the Web site, www.ecolabelling.org listed 300 different standards and certification schemes for communicating social and environmental product claims to consumers. Only a handful of these however, were independently audited.

The most difficult category is green products with attributes that are promised, intangible and not independently verified. Such products are the ones to be most skeptical of (such as "carbon-neutral" claims or use of emotionally sensitive imagery such as trees and scenery).

When the product claim gets vague, it is still possible to narrow your frame of reference to the



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logic of "conservation" (and how much). Unverified or confusing claims can usually be split into four levels. At the lowest level, a business needs to comply with relevant laws governing their control of hazards to the environment — controlled.

At the next level, businesses can be considerate of conserving resources through using less — prevented. This might appear in products as less packaging, or in the way in which it is made such as using less energy, or less distance traveled.

At a third level, products offer extended conservation beyond a single business, through incorporation of suppliers and lifecycle concerns. Here, products may select specialized suppliers or require them to become involved in the conservation effort (e.g. Whole Foods).

The final, and arguably "greenest" category of product, has been designed with conservation in mind. These goods effectively incorporate the principles of conservation into procurement, production, consumer use and post-use disposal. Examples include products that have avoided certain materials (lead-free), are more efficient during use (hybrid cars), and have their end-of-life issues taken care of through design for recycling.

As consumers, we can make decisions about whether a product's "green" claim can be experienced or at least verified. From there it's only a matter of how much of a difference we want to make and how much we're willing to pay for it.

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