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| Hewlett-Packard |
| It’s Not Easy Buying Green |
| Helping expose some of the problems found in green marketing as well as false conceptions of green alternatives |
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# The Shift to Green

With the recent surge in environmental awareness through efforts to warn people about the hazards of global warming, the shift in world focus has been great. Not too long ago, bigger was better, SUVs were statement vehicles; it seemed you were a better person the more fuel you could consume. Partly due to environmental consciousness, and partly due to rising energy costs, things began to change. People wanted alternatives just in case fuels sources were depleted. With a number of years things had shifted so much that in the United States more people recycle than vote . There are many alternatives or solutions offered by big business. We can find alternative fuels, sustainable products, and many products which offer green solutions, but all is not as it seems. There is a hidden truth and behind many alternatives, and many products are greatly misleading in their sustainability. The average consumer’s trust is taken advantage of by many manufactures. The public needs to become more aware of the underlying issues surrounding the green debate and educate themselves on the tricks typically pulled by advertisers. Regulations need to be made to safeguard the trust of consumers and help everyone know that what they buy is as good as it sounds. It is our duty to care for the environment. In a sense it is our duty to buy as sustainably as possible. According to Genesis, we are the stewards of the earth. As stewards we need to do our duty and care for the world.

## Green Initiatives

In response to the public awareness and corresponding demand for sustainable products, the marketing industry leapt forward with solutions. Particularly in the well developed industrial nations, industry quickly moved on the encouragement of shareholders to change certain practices or offer alternatives to current choices . More people began to buy organic, causing big business to cash in. Alternative energy sources such as biofuels, wind and solar power are being investigated. Green marketing is used to point out aspects of a product which may make it a potentially better option than related products. Also alternatives to current modes of transportation have been explored with the invention of the electric car.

1. Organic Foods

Organic alternatives is not a new concept, the term organic farming was first used in 1940 by an agriculturist in response to the large increase in chemical farming which relied heavily on synthetic fertilisers and monocultural farming . He argued that the crops would be susceptible to disease and that the world market would not be able to fully support farmers if they ship transglobally rather than growing where needed. Now that the shift has gone back to sustainable methods, people are paying attention to what he had to say. Suggestions such as rotating crops are easy to do, more difficult is the transition back to the natural fertilizers which may not have the needed balance of nutrients to maximise a crop. Now organic farming is the fastest growing segment of worldwide agriculture comprising 1.8% of all agricultural land.. If the exponential rate of growth continues, the world’s agriculture could be completely organic in less than thirty years.

1. Alternative Energy Sources

The search for alternative energy sources began as a project of the Bush Administration to reduce the American dependence on imported fossil fuels while elsewhere the motivation stemmed from concern over the sustainability of oil reserves. Alternative energy sources are considered to be sources which provide useful fuel with a limited carbon output. This excludes fossil fuels and nuclear power. The United Kingdom encouraged this transition through the implication of a law requiring that all fuels contain at least five percent biofuels by the year 2010. Typically biofuels such as bioethanol and biodiesel are harvested oil from various crops including soybeans, cereal crops, sugar cane and palm oils. They are considered better alternatives because the growth of the plant creates an uptake of carbon which counteracts the negative carbon output when the fuel is burned.

Other forms of alternative energy include geothermal energy, hydro power, solar power, tidal and wave power, as well as wind power. These involve a permanent fixture which harnesses the natural flow of energy in the environment such as solar energy or the mechanical energy of winds. Since there is no consumption of carbon and no production of carbon dioxide, this is more than a carbon neutral process, it is truly green.

1. Green Marketing

Green marketing came out of the desire to see organic foods. When it was realised that food could be produced sustainably people began to look at what else could be made greener. Household products were the next targeted followed closely by garden tools and then virtually all other types of products. Many companies were forced to change certain practices to keep up with competition. A company with green products had what it needed to stay ahead.

1. Electric Car

Transportation is one of the bigger issues when it comes to carbon output. Transportation is a necessity in the modern age whether it is for commuting or for the shipment of raw materials and manufactured goods. In order to combat the rising carbon costs, many manufactures are looking towards alternate methods such as electric cars or hybrids. The electric car runs on a battery that is charged over night and will be able to run for a set period of time before a recharge is needed. Similarly, the hybrid car runs on electricity but makes use of fossil fuels to sustain momentum and recharge the battery.

# Buyer Beware

There are many alternatives or solutions offered by big business but not everything is as perfect as it seems. Many of the solutions offered create problems in areas that the original problem had left alone. Due to the rampant interest in green products, many companies are trying to equalise the marketing field by making their products appear greener than the competition. There are many ways in which it is accomplish which can be observed by a simple walk through the supermarket. On every aisle there are products advertising new green packaging, or a new organic shape, which the words organic and green bolded. Everywhere you look, terms like all natural, earth friendly, sustainable and chemical free assault you, but what does it mean? There is so much talk and very little is said. Sometimes what you see is not the full story. In addition, sometimes the green market may cause more problems than it solves through the inadvertent encouragement of consumption. By promoting the sustainable practices of a company, green advertisers create more waste. What were given should not be taken at face value for many of the solutions offered are not that great of change. Biofuels typically create a lot of waste and other alternative energy methods are ineffectual. Green advertising can be difficult to trust. And sometimes the amount of things that need to change could never be worth the environmental cost of certain sustainable products.

## Biofuels – Not so Sustainable

Biofuels are typically regarded as the answer to fuel shortages around the globe. The fuels are made from crops which can be grown quickly and replanted when harvested, meaning an endless source of fuel. Theoretically, due to the carbon uptake by the crops during production, the carbon output of use will be equalised resulting in a carbon neutral fuel. The problem with this calculation is the only carbon output calculated is in the use of the fuel, no consideration is made for the amount of carbon used in the planting, maintenance, harvesting and processing of the crop . Another problem is due to the demand for the crops. As more biofuels is asked for, more crops must be planted which means there is a requirement for the production of new fields or the switch from food crops to fuel crops. New fields are acquired through deforestation, typically in the rainforest, drastically reducing the biodiversity of the surrounding land. The other option of switching over food crops is not a viable option either when the current global food shortage crisis is considered. A possible alternative to the current sources has been suggested, the use of waste organic materials from harvesting food crops. Most food crops have a lot of waste biomass that is usually burnt away. This can be saved and used to run equipment. This process is used in the large sugar mills. The residual biomass from harvest is used to run steam powered processing equipment .

There are similar problems in the electrical side of the alternative energy focus. Unlike other high carbon output methods, there can be unpredictable fluctuations in the energy sources . Modifications to solar panels allow them to work even on overcast days, yet they are nowhere close to the same efficiency that is seen on a clear day. As for wind turbines, wind levels are rarely consistent throughout the day which could cause great fluctuations in the power supply . Other methods such as geothermal energy are considered untrustworthy due to the uncertain effect of tapping into the earth’s core.

## Greenwashing

When a company uses green terms in advertising to promote the product, oftentimes it is considered greenwashing. Green washing is defined by the Webster’s New Millennium Dictionary as “the practice of promoting environmentally friendly programs to deflect attention from an organization's environmentally unfriendly or less savoury activities”. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines it as “the dissemination of misleading information by an organization to conceal its abuse of the environment in order to present a positive public image”. The rampant abuse of various trusted green claims has begun to erode public trust of green products. All green claims tend to be either fully accepted or completely rejected depending on the trust of the consumer. People need to learn to differentiate between the trustworthy claims and the ones that are completely false or simply misleading.

1. The Six Sins of Greenwashing

In response to the rampant rise in greenwashing, in 2007 a Canadian group called TerraChoice Environmental Marketing investigated the various types of green claims commonly encountered in an attempt to categorise them and alert the consumer. TerraChoice, the people behind the EcoLogo certification, went into six different big box stores in Canada and the United States and investigated 1,753 claims from 1,018 products. Only one product, of the ones surveyed, made truthful or non-misleading claims that could be verified . The remaining claims were categorised into six sins of advertising, the sin of the hidden trade-off, the sin of no proof, the sin of vagueness, the sin of irrelevance, and the sin of the lesser of two evils and the sin of fibbing.

1. Sin of the Hidden Trade-Off

Of the six sins determined by Terra Choice Environmental Group, the sin of the hidden trade off was the most prevalent at a rate of fifty-seven percent of the green claims made on surveyed products. Terra Choice defined the sin of the hidden trade-off as a company advertising their product as green due to a single attribute while disregarding other aspects of the product which may reduce the green nature of the product. The company uses truth to make an item appear sustainable while additional aspects of the product may not be as green. Many times the green aspect is so narrow it barely begins to equalise the detriment from other parts. Common examples of this are companies which manufacture recycled paper, recycled lumber products, insulation, raw sugar as well as many household, garden and personal care products.

Manufacturers such as paper or lumber and insulation companies typically advertise their products showing percent recycled materials as an indication of their sustainability. Often these claims do not account for the process of manufacturing the goods in terms of the environmental costs in energy, water, emissions and waste . While the product with recycled content may be a better alternative to other products, the product itself is not green. In addition, sometimes the companies claim green status due to their use of sustainable resources, while in fact, many times the sustainable resource is either being overused, or there are alternatives to the source which are more environmentally friendly. Companies that manufacture paper from sustainably harvested forests claim green status due to the harvest technique. Shipping the product from the sustainable forests may cause large carbon dioxide output through the use of the necessary transportation.

Many people run on the assumption that natural is better, renewable resources are the best way. Sometimes this can cloud the truly greener options. Organic, raw sugarcane is often considered to be the most sustainable way of producing sugar as opposed to manufactured refined sugars. Sugar plantations, however, are not very sustainable. The Hawaiian Commercial and Sugar Company on the island of Maui produces around 900 tonnes of sugar a day, eleven months of the year. Each acre that is harvested is burnt to reduce biomass and concentrate the sugar in the cane. The carbon output on commercial sugar is large even before the costs of processing and shipping is considered. Synthetic sugars, or sugars from other sources rather than cane, are much more sustainable.

Household products are a common target for greenwashing. A recent example is the Swiffer mop. Swiffer claimed that their product was more environmentally friendly because it uses less water and cleaners than a regular mop, plus the mop pads were made from recycled fibres. The Swiffer’s claims were true yet the product should not be considered more sustainable than the average mop due to the fact that the Swiffer mop head is disposable. The use of the product creates a much greater waste than the average mop. A better solution would be a broom, a reusable product that does not create water waste or an overuse of chemicals.

Cosmetic companies and other personal care product producers usually rely on one member of a line to promote the whole company as green. Bath and Body Works, a company which sells a broad range of bathroom supplies and cosmetics, introduced a green line of cosmetics which uses ingredients not tested on animals . The company hoped that this single line would encourage the consumers to believe that all their products were the same and therefore environmentally conscious.

1. Sin of No Proof

The sin of no proof was defined as a product making a claim to be sustainable or environmentally friendly without providing easily accessible proof to back the claim. The most commonly seen example of this sin was in cases of organic labelling. Many food companies will label their products as using organic ingredients without providing any proof of organic certification. Other cases involved uses of terms such as energy efficient or animal friendly. While these claims may be true, they cannot be fully trusted without certified backing. This sin is easy to overcome. Companies need to provide links on their websites, or gain certification to authenticate their claim. Of all products tested, twenty six percent were guilty of this sin.

1. Sin of Vagueness

One of the more frustrating of the sins is the sin of vagueness. This is when a term used by an advertiser is so broad that varying interpretations of the definitions could mean various things about the product. Also included in this category are claims which make no sense when a literal definition is used. Examples of this sin include usage of terms such chemical free, all natural, non toxic and earth friendly. Chemical free is meant to imply there are no harmful chemicals involved in the production or in the ingredients of the product, but nothing can be chemical free. Everything is chemical; even water . The term all natural is meant to mean there are no synthetics in the product, however a literal definition of the term is so broad it makes it meaningless. As for non toxic, everything, in some dosage, or some form can be somewhat toxic. The term earth friendly is also too broad of a definition to give the term any real meaning.

There are many types of products which frequently display related terms, including many personal care or cosmetic products. Personal care products are a wide ranging necessity, widely used and therefore susceptible to greenwashing. Even before the rampant green awareness began, personal care product companies were advertising the “natural” nature of their products, leading to expectations by consumers for their products to continue being “natural”. This only exacerbates the problem.

1. Sin of Irrelevance

The sin of irrelevance is advertising a certain feature as a green measure, when in actuality the feature is employed by all competitors anyway, either due to the nature of the product or to the law. The most common example of this concept is the use of a CFC-Free logo. CFCs are harmful ingredients which reduce the ozone layer, found in aerosol cans. Labelling an aerosol can as CFC-free is pointless as CFCs have been banned for the past thirty years . Another example would be the case of the shampoo bottle bearing the BPA free logo, useless as BPA is only harmful when ingested.

1. Sin of the Lesser of Two Evils

When a company advertises itself as green when theoretically the nature of the product it sells could never be green, it is called the sin of the lesser of two evils. A company with a negative image will often use this technique to distract the consumer from the true nature of the product. Organic cigarettes are sold because smokers feel that they are doing their part to maintain the environment. The tobacco they use is grown sustainably. The amount of pollution that a single pack of cigarettes can produce far outweighs any benefit which might be gained from the organic crop. Car companies are another culprit. They frequently advertise their new efficient cars as environmentally friendly, due less fuel consumption, or the use of alternative energy sources. Cars, while some are more efficient, are too consuming to be considered part of the green market. This problem led Norway to ban all car companies from using green advertising to sell their vehicles.

The New South Wales (NSW) Minerals council from Australia recently released a large amount of green advertisements in an effort to change public opinion of the company. This was done in response to the large shift in public opinion which threatened sales and support of mining . They called for public acceptance because of their large support of the agricultural industry.

1. Sin of Fibbing

Only found in less than one percent of products surveyed, the sin of fibbing is as much a problem as the rest of the sins. This sin, as implied, is when a company makes a green claim that can be definitively proven false, as opposed to an unsubstantiated claim seen in the sin of no proof . Most examples of this sin were companies falsely using third party certification logos such as Energystar and Certified Organic. Another example was a product claiming to use 100% recycled paper for its packaging while the product came in a plastic bottle. The companies which provide the certification all provide online lists of certified products, and some, including the EcoLogo keep fraud advisory pages (<http://www.ecologo.org/en/fraudadvisory/>) to warn of misuse of their labels.

## Cons of the Electric Car

The electric car and the hybrid are not as sustainable as they look to be. The consumer suns on the assumption that electricity is a better energy source. The electric car and the hybrid are not that different from the average vehicle, they rely on an energy source to gain and maintain momentum. Currently, road systems are designed for gas and diesel powered vehicles, and do not provide opportunities for drivers to plug in vehicles, or provide refuelling stations offering alternative fuels. Currently there are groups from British Columbia trying to form a partnership with the coastal American states in the production of a green highway which will introduce rest stops with plug in locations for electric cars. This project is yet years away due to border and passporting conflicts across the border.

In addition, the greenness of the electric car is not dependable on its type of energy, but rather on the source of the energy. It is naturally assumed that electricity is a sustainable and clean resource, but no consideration is made to the fact that electricity must be produced before it can be used. In the province of British Columbia every year fifteen percent of the province’s electricity requirements are bought in from Alberta and Washington State. While most of the electricity in British Columbia is cleanly produced through the more sustainable damming systems across the province, the fifteen percent of bought electricity is produced through the burning of coal and natural gas. The burning process has a near equivalent carbon output as an average car. This would mean that to run an electric car it would require the same fuel costs as gas or diesel powered vehicle . In addition, the province is buying electricity to keep up with current power demands. If the electric car was more commonly used, the strain on the hydro companies would require the purchase of even more natural gas and coal fuelled electricity.

# Conclusions

An often quoted line from the Muppet character Kermit the Frog is “it’s not easy being green”. Perhaps a better and more accurate interpretation of this line would be that it is not easy buying green. It seems that there is no way to avoid false advertising or hidden costs in all the green measures that are being implicated. But not all is lost; people are aware of the short comings and are seeking to make others aware. By taking a stand people can make a difference. The voice of the consumer can force a change in the minds of the supplier. In addition, by speaking out about the wrongs performed and pointing out the examples of other governments, we can force our government to create regulations to control what can be said and done in advertising.

## Laws and Regulations on Green Products

Some countries already have measures in place to control the rampant misuse of green terms in advertising. Norway recently forbade motor vehicle companies from using the words green, environmentally friendly, clean or other commonly used terms. This came out of reasoning that while a single car model may be more efficient than models from the same company or from competitors a car itself is not a green product and will always be a waste producer.

The UK is considering implementing regulations after receiving over 500 complaints in a single year about potential false green advertising up from just 117 the previous year. In the US a consumer green guide is getting its first update since 1998 to help find the truth about different products. While these measures are not doing much to control the rampant spread of greenwashing, they are showing that the government is listening to the complaints of the consumers.

If we continue to voice our concerns the government will be obligated to make changes, whether they are big or small, each is a step towards government regulations of green advertising. As it is said in Proverbs 10:9, “The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out”, if we make regulations for advertisers, the honest claims will be able to stand out.

## Consumer Education

As consumers we should not expect to be constantly told the truth by manufacturers and advertisers. There are very few forms of advertising where there is very little exaggeration; we need to expect somewhat the same in green advertising. We need to educate ourselves in what types of claims we need to be wary of. There are many resources available to help determine the validity of claims on various things one may encounter, including TerraChoice’s greenwashing paper and websites dedicated to exposing greenwashing.

If we only make an effort, much can be done to change the way green advertising is handled. As Christians, we should strive for honesty and integrity in all walks of our lives and lead lives that are examples to the people around us.

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