

**For Event Planners: It Is Easy Being Green!**  
**Here's how. Knowing what to watch for is key.**  
by Scott McKye, President of KLEERTECH

Imagine yourself as a well-intentioned meeting planner who has worked for many months trying to organize the greenest event yet. You get pulled aside on opening day by one of your board members with observations about some "green" aspects you didn't realize:

- Corn-based plastic cups, plates and silverware can't be recycled with regular plastic.
- The closest legitimate composting facility for corn plastic is two states away.
- Soy inks are not biodegradable nor as energy efficient as either linseed or sunflower inks.

How can you avoid falling victim to unsubstantiated "green" marketing claims? Educate yourself about what is or is not good for the environment — and the verification you need.

**Why going green matters to our industry**

The Environmental Protection Agency was established in 1970 to address the mounting environmental problems associated with our "throw-away society.". However, our industry was first made aware of its role as a major contributor to local landfills in the early 90s when the exact tonnage sent to landfills after each large show held at the McCormick Convention Center in Chicago was made public.

In fact, in the last two years, our industry has been identified as the second-most-polluting sector behind only the construction and demolition industry. Saddled with this dubious distinction, industry leaders are moving to change our reputation. Now, the "greening" of meetings has become a white-hot topic for every size of event across all of North America.

**Making value-weighted purchasing decisions**

The term "greenwashing" is a popular way to describe products marketed as environmentally friendly, when they are really not. A spin on the word "whitewashing," the new Oxford English dictionary defines greenwashing as "disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally responsible public image."

A 2007 survey of six category-leading stores conducted by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc. identified 1,018 consumer products with 1,753 environmental claims. Sadly, the findings say, "Of the 1,018 products examined, all but one made claims that are demonstrably false or that risk misleading intended audiences." The false or misleading claims were deemed the "Six Sins of Greenwashing™" — Sin of Hidden Trade-off, Sin of No Proof, Sin of Vagueness, Sin of Irrelevance, Sin of Lesser of Two Evils, and Sin of Fibbing. See [www.terrachoice.com/sixsinsofgreenwashing](http://www.terrachoice.com/sixsinsofgreenwashing) for more details.

Reducing or eliminating greenwashing is everyone's responsibility. Consumers must shoulder more of the responsibility to protect themselves, if for no other reason than so many marketers aren't thinking far enough ahead when they make green claims.

In the TerraChoice study, 57 percent of the suppliers committed the Sin of the Hidden Trade-off. True, suppliers have the same responsibility to examine every aspect of their products' creation, but the consumers have the real power. Each time we purchase, we vote. If we vote for products that have made the conscientious choice to be as green as possible, we help shape the marketplace.

### **What do you want to see?**

**Multiple-attribute claims:** As you seek greener alternatives, make your list of preferential characteristics. Don't settle for just one or two. The most respectable claims should incorporate impacts on the environment through every phase of a product's life-cycle. Greening should start with the raw materials, include the manufacturing process (think of the energy required) and continue on to design, packaging and product disposal — including the product's potential for reuse.

**Eco-labels:** The International Standards Organization's ISO 14024 standard provides principles and protocols that third-party labeling, 'seal' or practitioner programs should follow when developing environmental criteria for a particular product. Compliant organizations are listed at sites like [www.ecolabelling.org](http://www.ecolabelling.org) as certified by independent third-parties such as Ecologo<sup>CM</sup> or Green Seal. Those are just two of many organizations committed to developing environmental leadership standards using an open, transparent and consensus-based process.

### **Who do you trust?**

Relying on Ecologo and Green Seal as your verifier will make your job easier, but it is not the only way to determine if a company is greenwashing. Certainly, give the benefit of the doubt to vendors prepared to supply you with certifications earned through testing for positive environmental impact. If a manufacturer cannot or will not provide a copy of the environmental standard or testing protocol, you might suspect the claim is only a marketing ploy. When you do get a copy of the standard from a supplier, review it carefully. Make sure it references appropriate environmental and performance standards.

Standards to look for in certifications should be those developed in an open, public, transparent process similar to the way that American National Standards Institute (ANSI), American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) and ISO or other organizations develop public standards. Remember: The burden of proof is not on you after you've requested the information. By then, you've given the supplier of the product every opportunity to prove its claims are genuine.

### **The consequences of unchecked greenwashing**

To the extent greenwashing is left unchecked, the consequences will significantly reduce trust and motivation to do the right thing:

- Well-meaning buyers, like the hard-working event planner at the beginning of this piece, will be misled into purchasing products and services that don't fulfill their environmental promises.
- Greenwashing takes market share away from those truly environmentally conscientious and gives it to those with disingenuous green claims. That slows the introduction of truly legitimate products and reduces the beneficial impact on our environment.

- Prolonged, uncontrolled greenwashing could build both business and consumer cynicism — enough to reject all environmental claims, even the valid ones. Ironically, those most apt to turn callous and critical are those who really care the most about real environmental progress. Without a market-driven, financial incentive for green product innovation, the only force left to drive the market will likely be government-imposed regulations.

### **Can the government help?**

The government hasn't had a very good track record when it comes to empowering and steering innovative thinking and behavior. As recently as April of this year, the Federal Trade Commission noticed the surge in green advertising claims and accelerated its review of its own green guide by a full year. Last revised in 1998, a new edition of the FTC's guide will examine developments in green packaging claims and consumer perceptions of those claims — including new terms such as “carbon neutral” and “sustainable.”

Meanwhile, FTC's Laura DeMartino, assistant director of the enforcement division in the FTC bureau of consumer protection, recently advised marketers to “tell the truth” and “have substantiation” for their claims. In an April 2008 article in *Plastics News*, she cautioned marketers to ask, “What claims does my ad convey to reasonable consumers?” and “Do I have competent and reliable evidence to back up the claims?” For example, to substantiate a “recycled” claim, the material must be diverted from a solid waste stream and used in a product not diverted from the manufacturing process. In addition, the company must disclose content percentages so consumers know how much content is recycled. For those accused of deceptive claims or practices, the FTC may impose cease-and-desist orders, consumer refund requirements and ill-gotten-gains disgorgement provisions. Other penalties may include corrective advertising, “shame-on-us” disclosures in future advertisements and product labeling.

### **Honesty is still the best policy**

There are many non-government organizations, like Consumers Union, that are aware and watching. Marketers who want to ride the green movement must be prepared to pay full fare — and live up to their claims when consumers hold up products for scrutiny.

The 200 largest tradeshow held in the U.S. in 2007 brought a positive economic impact of \$6.53 billion to the surrounding communities — a 4 percent increase from 2006. These top 200 shows represent less than 10 percent of the total size of the Event, Meeting and Trade Show market sector, according to *Tradeshow Week*. The pressure to be perceived as offering environmentally conscientious products at reasonable costs is irresistible, given the billions of dollars being spent in our industry. Add meetings held all over the globe, and the size of the market is staggering. This much money can certainly affect marketer's desires to be known as the source for green solutions. It's best for everyone if we let honesty and open-mindedness guide us instead of greed, which can come from seeing too much green ahead.

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**Scott McKye**, KLEERTECH President, has more than 20 years experience in the tradeshow and meetings industry. He is a member of the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), International Association of Exhibitions and Events (IAEE), Meeting Professional International (MPI), IAEE's Committee of Environmentally Responsible Exhibitions and Events, American Society of Testing and Materials (ASTM), Green Meeting Industry Council (GMIC), and is Communications

Committee Co-Chair for GMIC's Green Meetings & Events Practices Apex Panel. Scott received Trade Show Executive magazine's *2008 Innovator of the Year* Award and has participated in several green meeting events as a featured speaker or expert panelist

## **Other Resources**

Single-attribute environmental standard setting and certification organizations are also available. If your goal is to focus on a single significant environmental issue, such as indoor air quality or recycled content, the following organizations are helpful:

- Forest Stewardship Council ([www.fscus.org](http://www.fscus.org)): certifies wood products obtained from sustainably harvested forests and uses a multi-attribute approach for preferable papers.
- Green-e ([www.green-e.org](http://www.green-e.org)): certifies sources of renewable electricity and renewable energy credits generated from clean energy sources such as wind, solar or small-scale hydro-electric power. It also certifies products manufactured in facilities using renewable energy.
- GREENGUARD ([www.greenguard.org](http://www.greenguard.org)): focuses exclusively on indoor air quality issues. Its Web site includes certified products in more than 15 different categories, from paint to baby cribs and mattresses to cleaning systems, flooring, adhesives, wall coverings, heating ventilating and air conditioning (HVAC) ductwork, window treatments, countertops, tiles, cabinets and office furnishings. Today, over 120 manufacturers participate in the testing program with more than 150,000 certified products.

Other programs allow manufacturers to declare that their products meet a publicly available standard. Then they conduct random audits to maintain the integrity of the environmental declarations. Public standards also allow others to independently verify the accuracy of any claims:

- Energy Star Program ([www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov)): establishes energy-efficiency criteria for a wide variety of products in more than 40 product categories. The site for this federal government program lists all of the products that meet Energy Star efficiency requirements. It also includes recommended purchasing specifications and online training resources.
- Electronic Product Environmental Assessment Tool (EPEAT, [www.epeat.net](http://www.epeat.net)): ranks computer desktops, laptops and monitors into EPEAT Bronze, Silver or Gold categories based on more than 50 environmental criteria. Currently, more than 600 products from 23 manufacturers are on the EPEAT registry.