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Green cleaning products sold at 'g' Green Design Center at Mashpee Commons.

Cape Cod Times/Ron Schloerb

What does 'green' really mean?

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February 24, 2008

If trying to figure out what "green" means is causing you to see red, you're hardly alone.

For two decades, words like "natural," "organic" and "recycled" have been used to attract the interest of eco-conscious consumers. "Green" is the new tag to promote everything from paper to building materials

that are good for — or from — the environment.

Green concerns

Some items trumpeted as being "green" or even "environmentally friendly" don't quite measure up:

- Tests on cork and bamboo flooring by ShopSmart magazine, published by Consumer Reports, showed that these floors may not wear or retain their colors well. That could mean replacing a floor more often, resulting in more waste in a landfill. An alternative: sunlight- and dent-resistant linoleum.
- Similarly, carpets using natural fibers or recycled synthetic materials are touted as "eco-friendlier," but when they are used in entryways and other high-traffic areas, dirt and moisture make them susceptible to deterioration.
- Some paints with low or no volatile organic compounds aren't as durable as paints containing organic compounds, volatile or otherwise, according to ShopSmart. But Deborah Zimmer, paint and color expert with Rohm & Haas' Paint Quality Institute in Spring House, Pa., says low-VOC paints are being "reformulated to provide a long-lasting and durable finish."

- The Philadelphia Inquirer

But for consumers, it can be almost impossible to tell exactly what "green" means.

"There's no 'green' stamp of approval that we all agree on at this time," says Nicole Goldman, owner of 'g' Green Design Center in Mashpee Commons. Her store sells green products of all kinds for the home, from building and furnishing materials to biodegradable trash-can liners and light bulbs, towels, cleansers and fabric. But, in general, for a product to be considered green, she says, it has to be ecologically sound, healthy, energy-efficient, renewable, reusable, have recyclable content or be highly durable.

Part of energy-efficiency, too, involves not only the amount of fossil fuels it might take to use a product but also to produce or transport it.

"You have to look at the entire product," Goldman says. She cites a carpet company that advertises an eco-friendly carpet that contains 30 percent recycled content and is manufactured in a facility that follows some environmentally friendly policies.

But to make that carpet, the company uses urea formaldehyde, and the nylon backing includes all kinds of chemicals.

"That's greenwashing," Goldman says, using the negative term common among environmentalists to describe false eco-friendly claims.

In November, Terrachoice Environmental Marketing Inc. in Philadelphia released a study that resulted in listing "The Six Sins of Greenwashing" to give a sense of what consumers should watch out for:

1. The hidden trade-off: when so-called "energy-efficient" products are made with hazardous materials. As many as 57 percent of all environmental claims fall into this category, the study found.
2. No proof of claim: when no verifiable certification is available for a particular designation or product promotion, for example as "organic." More than a quarter of environmental claims fail on this point.
3. Vagueness: when a claim is so general it is misleading. For example, claims of "natural" products being better, healthier, safer, when certain naturally occurring substances — such as arsenic — are harmful as well. Seen in about one in 10 environmental claims.
4. Irrelevance: when a claim no longer is meaningful in the marketplace. For example, some products claim to be free of chlorofluorocarbons, even though CFCs were banned 20 years ago. Occurs in about 4 percent of environmental claims.
5. Fibbing: when products are falsely promoted as certified by an internationally recognized environmental standard, like Energy Star or Green Seal. Happens in less than 1 percent of environmental claims.
6. Lesser of two evils: when promotion is done for such bad-for-you products as organic cigarettes or environmentally friendly pesticides.

Some manufacturers warn consumers to do their homework before making purchases, including looking at the production process of items labeled "green."

The Web site iFloor.com, for example, recently issued a caution against "ecomylths," noting that bamboo flooring is "naturalized" in a large vat of chlorine, and some companies may not drain that properly. Cork may be fine if produced in Europe, but no factories in China have an acceptable formaldehyde level during production.

Staying alert to the potential for false or misleading claims is important for more than products. It's also important when it comes to building green.

Green buildings "integrate a variety of practices and features to create healthy indoor and outdoor living environments, lower energy bills and life-cycle costs and reduce environmental harm," says Joan Muller, education coordinator at the Waquoit Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, which has been instrumental in organizing green-living seminars and workshops for Cape businesses and residents.

For example, in home construction, she says, "green" planning could incorporate "sustainable site strategies," including ecological site design, erosion control, how to handle storm water, how the structure is oriented, using native plants for landscaping and methods of soil restoration or preservation.

For interior construction and remodeling, she says, green products can refer to everything from nontoxic or low-emission paints, varnishes and sealants to carpets, countertops of recycled materials and flooring made of bamboo.

Growing guidelines

But there are limited guidelines or rating systems for what makes a product or building environmentally friendly, though the recent spotlight on "green" has spurred more branches of the home-related industry to at least start taking action. For appliances, there's the federal Energy Star rating; for wood products, the Forest Stewardship Council certifies the wood has been obtained from sustainably harvested forests.

Some industry members recently founded the Sustainable Furniture Council to set up a ratings system that could be ready later this year. The American Furniture Manufacturers Association (www.findyourfurniture.com) also unveiled a "Sustainable by Design" eco-label program in November, to guide companies in eco-friendly practices and let consumers know whether a product is really green based on such criteria as energy and water consumption and formaldehyde emissions.

"Consumers' attitude toward 'green' products has moved from 'tell me' to 'show me' to, now, 'prove it to me.' It is no longer satisfactory to just market a product as 'green.' It must be demonstrated," says Bill Perdue, the alliance's vice president of environmental management, health, safety and standards. "So companies are faced with 'verifying' to the consumer that their implementation of sustainable business practices results in a meaningful 'green' product."

Greenwashing

Manufacturers may tout their projects as being good for the environment, but are they? Materials don't make the grade if they:

- Come from very distant sources, therefore costing fuel to obtain
- Duplicate existing products but say they're green
- Use toxic binders with "green" materials
- Don't recycle or break down easily
- Are made by companies that say they are committed to the environment but continue to waste energy, use chemicals and otherwise take no earth-friendly action

Source: architect Susan Buchan, Sage Design of Cape Cod and Arizona

Will they buy?

A poll of more than 1,200 U.S. homeowners conducted by the market-research firm Ipsos Reid on behalf of Icynene, an insulation manufacturer, found that:

- Seventy percent believe that when "companies call a home-building product 'green,' it is usually just a marketing tactic."
- Forty-four percent are not willing to pay more up front for green building products, despite their potential environmental and cost-saving benefits
- More than one-third of homeowners surveyed didn't clearly understand the benefit of products advertised as being green or environmentally friendly.

- The Philadelphia Inquirer