

## How to Avoid ‘Greenwashing’

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Special to the News & Record

Sunday, April 10, 2011

With the onslaught of marketing aimed at consumers, and the multitude of products at their disposal to purchase, it can be a challenge deciphering which products live up to their claims.

We all struggle with this situation daily because of the wide variety of purchases we consider. I recall as a child wanting a particular pair of sneakers, convinced because of a television advertisement that I would “run faster and jump higher.” Even as a contractor, I still can fall victim to many of the same trappings of unsubstantiated marketing techniques. “Greenwashing” is the term used to characterize some of these claims.

Greenwashing, as defined by environmental marketing agency TerraChoice ([terrachoice.com](http://terrachoice.com)), is “the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service.” TerraChoice expands on this by saying that “well-intentioned consumers may be misled into purchases that do not deliver on their environmental promise. This means both that the individual consumer has been misled and that the environmental benefit of his or her purchase has been squandered.”

The construction industry is no stranger to deceptive marketing. A home is made up of hundreds of products. These products are impacted by the way they are installed and how they interact with one another. It is my responsibility to make the choices in a construction project that will yield the best completed result.

As a “green builder,” many of my decisions are based on environmental impact. Claims both accurate and deceptive abound as I make decisions. These choices, when based upon fact rather than ads, will make my finished green project more satisfying to clients and have a lessened negative impact on our fragile environment.

So how do we know what is a truly green product? And how do we know when we are being greenwashed? There is no catch-all litmus test for this, but there is some consensus on what makes a product “green.” Environmental organization Green Global USA ([globalgreen.org](http://globalgreen.org)) defines five basic categories:

- Save energy.
- Conserve water.
- Contribute to a safe, indoor environment.
- Protect natural resources.
- Reduce building’s impact on community.

While it may seem daunting to vet a particular building product, there are simpler ways to evaluate claims. There are independent certification programs with third-party testing that assign their logos to products that meet their specifications, including Energy Star, Forest Stewardship Council, Carpet and Rug Institute Green Label, Greenguard and Green Seal. Additionally, GreenSpec is an extensive database of environmentally friendly building materials published by the Environmental Building News.

The best way to guarantee a new home is built to a rigorous green standard is to have it certified through one of several reputable programs. I know firsthand that the Environmental Protection Agency's Energy Star program is an excellent place to start. Other excellent programs that include third-party verification to examine all aspects of the project and how it impacts the environment are the National Association of Home Builders Green Building Standard, the LEED for Homes certification program and the N.C. HealthyBuilt Homes program. Knowing that your new home has been examined through one of these programs assures you of its green integrity.

So do your homework, don't be coaxed through unsubstantiated marketing claims and look for third-party certifications when you make your next investment in a building project or product. This will ensure your participation in the stewardship of our precious environment.