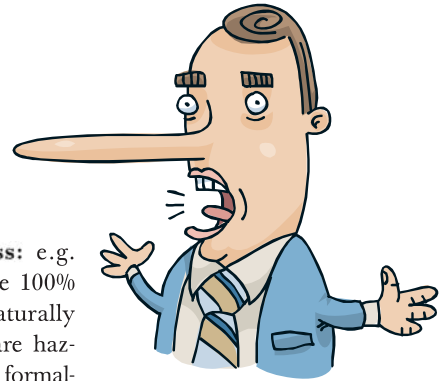


# How to Identify Greenwashing

By Fred Gebhart



**T**O GREENWASH OR NOT to greenwash, that is not the question. In reality, all kinds of companies do it all the time: 100% Pure! All Natural! Guaranteed Biodegradable! All Recycled Materials!

Greenwashing is a touchy area for the travel industry. That's no surprise, since the term was coined about a travel supplier segment.

Greenwash is a combination of green and whitewash. The word first appeared in a 1986 essay by New York environmentalist Jay Westerveld. His complaint: hotels that put green cards in guest rooms suggesting that towels could be reused instead of washed every day. It wasn't that reusing towels is bad, but that hotels apparently didn't do anything more substantial like waste recycling.

Westerveld called such moves a façade, an attempt by hotels to 'wash themselves green' when all they really wanted to do was cut the daily laundry bill to boost profits.

Fast forward two decades, and many hotels have taken serious steps in reducing energy use, reducing water use, reducing waste, increasing recycling, and in other areas that significantly reduce their environmental impact. But greenwashing remains an issue.

"IATA (International Air Transport Association) saved millions of trees and tons of ink when they moved us to electronic tickets," said an industry executive who asked not to be named. "But people would have hooted if IATA or an airline had suggested that e-tickets had any impact beyond saving airlines tens of millions of dollars. The perception of greenwashing can kill you even if you're telling the truth."

It doesn't help that many green claims are less than true.

In November, 2007, green marketing firm TerraChoice released a survey of 1,081 common consumer products ranging from toothpaste to shampoo to caulking and printers. Of the 1,753 environmentally friendly claims made by the products surveyed, 99% were false or misleading, said TerraChoice president Scott McDougall.

TerraChoice separated the claims into what it called the Six Sins of Greenwashing. These sins are as much at home in travel marketing as in the consumer products world.

Here's what to watch for:

• **Sin of the Hidden Trade-Off:** e.g. "Energy-efficient" electronics that contain hazardous materials. 998 products or 57% of all environmental claims committed this Sin.

• **Sin of No Proof:** e.g. Shampoos claiming to be "certified organic," but with no verifiable certification. 454 products and 26% of environmental claims

committed this Sin.

• **Sin of Vagueness:** e.g. Products claiming to be 100% natural when many naturally occurring substances are hazardous, like arsenic and formaldehyde. Seen in 196 products or 11% of environmental claims.

• **Sin of Irrelevance:** e.g. Products claiming to be CFC-free, even though CFCs were banned 20 years ago. This Sin was seen in 78 products and 4% of environmental claims.

• **Sin of Fibbing:** e.g. Products falsely claiming to be certified by an internationally recognized environmental standard like EcoLogo, Energy Star or Green Seal. Found in 10 products or less than 1% of environmental claims.

• **Sin of The Lesser of Two Evils:** e.g. Organic cigarettes or "environmentally friendly" pesticides. This occurred in 17 products or 1% of environmental claims.

The bottom line for the travel suppliers and travel agents: Do your own green claims pass the sin test?

"Because of market demand toward sustainable operations, travelers themselves are forcing the issue," warned Kelly Bricker, Board chair and acting executive director of the International Ecotourism Society. "People identify greenwashing and questionable claims on blogs every day. Suppliers can't hide as easily these days."

## ASTA's Green Program for Agencies

**THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF** Travel Agents has developed a Green Program for travel agencies that is based on self-evaluation and includes ongoing education and a promotional component.

The foundation of the program — which is not a certification program — is self-assessment. Interested ASTA members first purchase a copy of the ASTA Green Guide for Travel Agents (\$49). The Guide is an educational report including information on green travel and on how to make internal agency operations more environmentally responsible.

Participants must complete a checklist (it's included in the Guide) that evaluates the sustainable practices in their own agency operations and return it to ASTA, along with an agreement to follow the Green Code of Ethics, and to follow usage rules for ASTA's Green Member Logo.

"The first section of the Green Guide is about assessing yourself and looking at your own operations so that you can be legitimate," said Melissa Teates, ASTA's director of research and the program's project manager. "If people really, truly care about this, the first thing they are going to ask is what you do in your own office." ASTA implemented its own Green Program internally at ASTA headquarters before rolling it out for members. "We are going to continuously update our Green Guide," Teates noted. "We consider it a pathway, and it will grow in content and focus as sustainable travel changes and grows."

Agency participation in the Green Program includes membership for one year. Benefits include use of the ASTA Green Member logo for promotional purposes and ongoing education, including updated versions of the ASTA Green Report (emailed to participants), a "green hint" emailed weekly, and a monthly ASTA eTips newsletter on green travel and green business operations. Green Program members also receive a checklist to assess travel suppliers, and other tools. Annual renewal in the program is required.

Information about the Green Program for agencies, and a program for suppliers, is available on [www.asta.org/green](http://www.asta.org/green). Contact Shiv Newaldass at 703-739-6885; [snewaldass@asta.org](mailto:snewaldass@asta.org).