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**Red Flags for Greenwashing**

This year, Zero Waste Humboldt public education will emphasize the mindfulness needed to be a conscious environmentalist at the point-of-purchase– in local stores, even on-line. It is easy to be fooled by claims that products are good for the environment. We must become more alert and willing to communicate with the manufacturers responsible for greenwash, and the local stores where we buy these products. The main problem caused by greenwashing is that it convinces people to behave in unsustainable and environmentally-detrimental ways.

Greenwashing, also referred to as “Green Sheen” marketing, is the process of conveying a false impression or providing misleading information about how a company's products are more environmentally sound. Greenwashing is a play on the term "whitewashing," which means using misleading information to gloss over bad behavior.

Consumer research conducted for manufacturers – of especially single use packaging and products – has been used to adopt key words used by the growing numbers of their customers who are increasingly concerned about environmental impacts of what they buy. They capitalize on this demand for environmentally beneficial or sustainable products by pitching them as less wasteful, more natural, healthier, chemical free, using even over-simplified and meaningless terms.

In 2007, marketing firm, TerraChoice, reported the Six Sins of Greenwashing. If you are tired of marketeers playing on your environmental concerns to convince you to buy, here six red flags for when you shop:

1. **Trading Off Benefits** – For example, a company may say its packaging is recyclable, without mentioning their horrendous practices in resource extraction.
2. **Unsubstantiated Environmental Claims** may be the most appalling and common greenwash practices. Companies may claim “made with recycled materials” or “eco-friendly ingredients” without any verification from reliable sources about these claims. Most companies that are dedicated to the values of environmental sustainability are transparent with details on their websites about how their product has been made.
3. **Irrelevant Call-Outs on Packaging** to catch your eye on the competitive store shelf space. Packages will have labels that mean nothing but sound good. For example, even though CFC has been banned for 30+ years, a company may label packaging as CFC-free.
4. **Vague Language and Wording** is common in greenwash marketing to manipulate environmentally-oriented shoppers. “Non-toxic,” “green,” “plant-based,” “eco,” “environmentally-friendly,” “bio,” and “sustainable practices,” are all examples of vagueness intended win your purchase. You have to check the company packages and websites for reputable certifications and proof of authenticity.
5. **The Lesser of Two Evils** promotes a harmful product as a “better” alternative. These are eco-friendly claims on products that are environmentally destructive, like organic tobacco or green pesticides! The petrochemical industry has gotten even richer this year by claiming that single use plastic food and beverage packaging, take home containers, and tableware are cleaner and safer against COVID19. Research has not supported their claims.
6. **Boldfaced Lies** are outright false claims. TerraChoice reports that this can be the most difficult to identify. Often it involves the misuse of third party certifications. In 2013, several state attorney generals found the plastics industry use of the recycling logo with the three chasing arrows to be misleading because the logo alone does not indicate nor assure that the package is recyclable --- most plastic isn’t.