

Checklist: five tips to spot greenwashing

1. Vague expressions without justification

Made with respect for the environment! So, how? Greenwashing is often about the use of words and phrases whose meaning is unclear or open to interpretation.

If an advertisement uses general or vague claims such as responsible, green, sustainable or ecological, it is important that the claim is substantiated. Of course, these arguments should also be read with a critical eye.

Ask yourself: what does this statement really mean? What does the message prove about the product?

2. Getting to scale and cherrypicking

An attempt may be made to draw consumers' attention to a small act of responsibility.

Take packaging, for example: a company may advertise that its product is ecological because it is packaged in biodegradable material. However, packaging is only a small part of the overall environmental impact of a product, and it is the impact of the manufacturing of the product itself that matters more.

Ask yourself: What do I not yet know about this product or its footprint? How can I find out?

3. Labels, certificates and stamps

The rule of thumb when assessing the various certificates that communicate responsibility is: a certificate issued by an external, independent body is more credible than a label or certificate developed by the company itself. The criteria for the certificate should be ambitious and publicly available. The implementation of the criteria should be monitored and evaluated by someone other than the company itself. This is how a Fair Trade certificate works, for example.

All certifications should be looked at critically: just because a company says it is certified does not mean that everything is OK. The company should also be open about any production problems, how they are being addressed and the timeframe.

Ask yourself: who says this, and why should I trust them? And what is the statement really saying?

4. Building images with colours and pictures

Blue sky, green lawn, laughing child, happily grazing cow... Wait a minute! This type of imagery is often used to create an image of a product's naturalness on the one hand and animal welfare on the other.

Typically, the colour green creates images of ecology or environmental friendliness, white and blue refer to cleanliness, while brown packaging material is easily associated with recycled materials and earthiness. However, the images and colours used do not necessarily have anything to do with the environmental friendliness of the product.

Ask yourself: What does this imagery prove about the product? Would I be tempted to buy it without this packaging?

5. Transparency and facts in order

Of course, for a claim not to be greenwashing, it must be true. It must not mislead the consumer by being false, inaccurate, vague or ambiguous.

A good environmental or sustainability claim tells you exactly how a product, service or company is less harmful to the environment or more respectful of human rights.

For example, one cleaning company justifies the sustainability of the cleaning tablets it has developed by saying that "they replace cleaning products packaged in single-use plastic bottles, reducing waste and the need for transport." Here we are at the concrete level, well done!

Ask yourself: where can I find proof for the quality being praised?