

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Division of Consumer & Business Education

Shopping "Green"

Want to buy products that are good for the environment? Many companies are betting that you do. They're making claims and designing packages to promote the "green" attributes of their products. What do those claims tell you? The standards for truth in green advertising are explained in the Green Guides, which are enforced by the FTC. The message of the Guides for businesses: you must have sound science to back up the green claims you make for your products. The message for you: when you're shopping, look for specific information — or trusted certifications — on packages and products that tell you what makes the product environmentally friendly — and worthy of a green promotion.

What's the Deal With Green Marketing Claims?

Green. Environmentally safe. Eco friendly. Claims like these sound great, but let's face it: they're too vague to be meaningful. The fact is that all packaging and products have some environmental impact.

With so many marketers using the Green Guides as a road map for their green claims, it's good for you to know what those green terms mean, as well. As you shop and compare products, look for details about what makes the package or product green, or what might have earned it a special seal or certification.

"Free Of" and Other Common Claims

"Free Of"

Companies may make a point of letting you know their products are "free of" a chemical or other ingredient that may be a concern. When marketers say a product is "free of" an ingredient, it means the product doesn't have any more than a harmless trace amount of it — and the product is free of any other ingredient that poses the same kind of risk.

VOC-Free

You may have seen products labeled "low-VOC" or "VOC-free." VOCs — or volatile organic compounds — are found in paint, household cleaning products, floor polishes, charcoal lighter fluid, windshield wiper fluid, and some hair styling products, among other products. They are emitted as gases, and may cause smog by contributing to ground-level ozone formation, or have negative effects on your health.

Non-Toxic

Marketers who say a product is "non-toxic" must have proof that the product is safe for both humans **and** the environment. If it's safe for humans **or** the environment, the product or package should say which one.

Ozone-Friendly

All ozone is not alike. The ozone layer in the upper atmosphere prevents harmful radiation from the sun from reaching the earth. But ozone at ground level forms smog and can cause serious breathing problems for some people.

If a company claims its products are "ozone-friendly" or "ozone safe," it should have proof that the products do not harm the upper ozone layer and the air at the ground level.

Less Waste

It's not enough for a marketer to claim its product or package is made with "less waste." The company must have specifics about the comparison. For example, a company could say a product has 10 percent less waste than a previous product.

Seals and Certifications

You see a picture of the globe with the words "Earth Smart" on a product. What does that mean? Seals or certifications can be useful, but only if they're backed up by solid standards and give you enough information to understand what they mean. A package also should tell you about any connections the company has to the organization behind the seal, if a connection might influence your opinion about the certificate or seal.

Biodegradable and Compostable

Biodegradable

Something that's biodegradable, like food or leaves, breaks down and decomposes into elements found in nature when it's exposed to light, air, moisture, certain bacteria, or other organisms.

But even if a product is biodegradable under some circumstances, what happens if it goes to a landfill? Landfills are designed to shut out sunlight, air, and moisture. That keeps pollutants out of the air and drinking water, but also slows decomposition. Even materials like paper and food could take decades to decompose in a landfill.

If a company says its product or package is "degradable," it should have proof that the product will completely break down and return to nature within a year. A company shouldn't say a product is degradable if the product is headed for a landfill, incinerator, or recycling center.

Most cleaning products that display biodegradable claims — like detergents and shampoos — typically degrade in wastewater systems.

Compostable

Some materials break down into useable compost — material that enriches the soil and returns nutrients to the earth. Some people compost yard trimmings and food scraps, and many communities collect leaves, grass, and other yard trimmings for composting.

When you see "compostable" on a product or package, it means the manufacturer has made sure the material can be composted safely in home compost piles. If it can't be, the product or package should say where it can be composted.

Recyclable and Recycled

Recyclable

A company can say a product is recyclable or can use the universal recycling symbol if most people who buy it can recycle it. But that doesn't mean you'll be able to recycle it where you live. Your best source of information about this: your city or county government.

Recycled

Recycled products are made with content that was kept out of — or diverted from — the trash either during the manufacturing process or after people used a product. If a product says it's made from recycled materials, look for specifics. Are the claims about the product, the packaging, or both? How much of the product or package is recycled? If the product or package isn't made completely from recycled materials, the label must tell how much of it is.

For more, read *The Language of Recycling* at ftc.gov/green.

Renewable Materials, Renewable Energy, and Carbon Offsets

Made With Renewable Materials

Products or packages that claim to be made with renewable materials might tell you what the materials are, why they're renewable, and how much of the product was made with renewable material. For example, a manufacturer could say, "Our flooring is made from 100% bamboo, which grows at the same rate as we use it."

Made With Renewable Energy

A company can power its manufacturing with renewable energy like wind or solar energy, or with non-renewable fossil fuels. A company that uses non-renewable fossil fuels can buy renewable energy certificates (RECs) to "offset" the non-renewable energy it used.

If a product says "made with renewable energy," all the manufacturing processes should be powered by renewable energy, or by non-renewable energy matched by RECs. If that's not true, the product package should tell you how much of the process is.

Carbon Offsets

A company that takes actions to reduce greenhouse gasses, like planting trees, can get credits for those "carbon offset" activities. Some companies that earn these carbon offset credits sell them to other companies that might want to reduce their "carbon footprints."