

The 8 Shades of Greenwash

How many do you recognize?

Most building products these days have an environmental angle to their sales pitches. Many are legit, but as ever, you still have to watch for the telltale signs of greenwash—the practice of inventing or exaggerating the environmental benefits of a product.



Example:
A conventional product with toxic life-cycle impacts has a booth display at a green expo

**GW-001
Hummer On The Mount**
They're "green by association": simply by putting their products next to a green image like a sparkling stream or mountaintop vista, manufacturers give their products a green aura.



Example:
Casework claiming "low VOCs" without providing information on what chemicals were tested for or what testing protocols were used

**GW-002
That Green Fuzzy Feeling**
Companies provide overly simplified information or undefined terms disguised as positive performance features. Even "recycled" and "recyclable" can be purposefully vague.



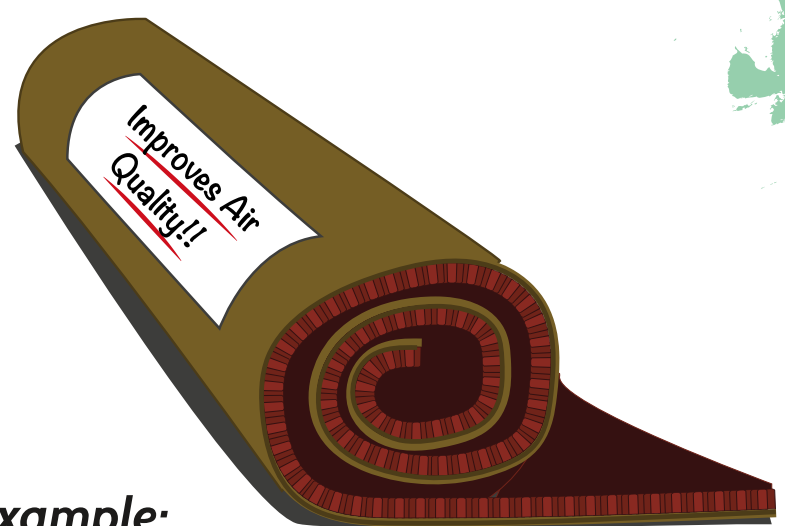
Example:
A chair boasting "Made with recyclable plastic!" even though the company doesn't have a take-back program, and most areas don't recycle that type of plastic

**GW-003
In Us We Trust**
Some claims are pretty specific but aren't proven. Key information is hidden as "proprietary," and impressive-sounding jargon may be used that can't be backed up by third-party lab reports or certifications.



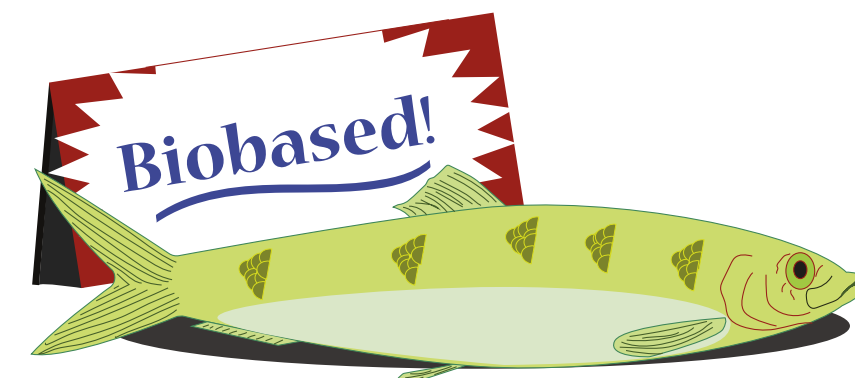
Example:
A brochure using graphs, charts, and footnotes to report life-cycle assessment results in a scientific-sounding but biased way

**GW-004
Blinding You With Science**
Some companies or trade associations provide plenty of data, but they fail to mention that their research methodology isn't widely accepted or that data were selectively shared to make their products look superior.



Example:
Drywall marketed as improving occupant health because it contains antimicrobials to control mold growth in the event of water damage

**GW-005
Grains of Truthiness**
Specific and verifiable performance features get inflated into unverifiable claims that don't follow logically and would require deeper study.



Example:
Spray polyurethane foam boasting biobased content (in the fine print, only 3%) but also containing hazardous chemicals and potent greenhouse gases

**GW-006
The Green Herring**
A company chooses one positive aspect of a product to highlight, like low carbon or recycled content, while ignoring other, more relevant environmental impacts.



Example:
A heavily promoted line of certified sustainably-harvested cedar shingles made by a company that largely sells uncertified shingles

**GW-007
Thin Patina**
It's a classic bait-and-switch: a company markets a token super-green product but uses its green creds to attract buyers of business-as-usual items.

**GW-008
How Low Can You Logo**
A product earns an apparently valid third-party certification, but a trade association has influenced the standard's development to make it relatively weak.



Example:
A sustainability standard written by the forest products industry that lacks key environmental provisions and is less stringent than the competition

Who Greenwashes—And How Not To

Manufacturers:

Whether intentionally or not, they serenade the green market with messages that may be inaccurate or out of context.

Instead:

Take time to understand the rules of the game, and create and market products that truly add value to green projects.

Trade Associations:

In the perceived interests of their members, they water down standards and testing requirements.

Instead:

Partner with environmental groups, using your expertise to steer standards to areas where you can define leadership, not a lowest common denominator.

Third Parties:

To earn business and market share, third-party certification organizations or laboratories can provide credibility to poorly conceived programs.

Instead:

Treat your credibility as your currency. Collaborate with other organizations to reduce noise in the market.

Design and Construction Firms:

They tout their product selection as if a few recycled or low-VOC products constitute a green building.

Instead:

Take pride not only in product selections but also in higher-impact strategies like reducing overall material use, choosing a walkable site, and using an integrative process to guarantee operational performance.