

## Avoid the “Seven Sins”

*by Serenity J. Knutson*

Greenwashing. What is it? What does it look and sound like? Why does it matter?

TerraChoice Environmental Marketing, Inc. defines the verb greenwash as follows: “the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service.”

According to Stephen Cataldo of SpaceShare Green Travel, “Greenwashing is whitewashing—as in covering up something you're doing wrong—around environmental issues.”

In April 2009, TerraChoice released a report called “The Seven Sins of Greenwashing.” TerraChoice researchers studied 2,219 North American products that comprised 4,996 green claims. Of those products, researchers found that 98 percent committed at least one of the seven sins, according to the report.

Shawna McKinley, a project manager for MeetGreen®, stresses that planners and suppliers can be equally guilty of greenwashing. She has composed her own translations of TerraChoice’s seven sins to illustrate their meetings industry-specific meaning:

1. The Sin of the Hidden Trade-off. “That is fabulous you can provide organic produce, but I would really prefer something local that does not need to be shipped 3,000 km from farm to plate, thank you very much.”
2. The Sin of No-Proof. “So... exactly what environmentally-responsible cleaners do you use at your hotel, anyway? Can I see them?”
3. The Sin of Vagueness. “I appreciate that you provide a zero-waste conference, but what does that really mean?”
4. The Sin of Irrelevance. “Huh. That is a new one. I've never heard of a water-conserving light bulb before.”
5. The Sin of Fibbing. “You said you recycled... so why do I see plastic and paper in the trash bin at the back dock?”

6. The Sin of the Lesser of Two Evils. “That is great you planned a carbon-neutral conference, but did you actually reduce any emissions?”
7. The Sin of Worshiping False Labels. “But I thought you said you were a Green Seal-certified hotel. You're not on their website.”

Many industry pros say they encounter incidents of greenwashing all the time.

“One common example is hotels that advertise a big claim about being green, but are purely using it as a cost-cutting measure and haven't put any real effort into greening,” Cataldo says. “They have a towel reuse program but no recycling program. Another events example would be if an event puts out composting bins even when they know the waste that comes back will be too mixed up to be compostable.”

Speaking of towel reuse, an often-heard complaint centers on hotels that claim they implement a reuse program, but housekeeping staff members collect each day, anyway. Jo Sudore, an events manager with Perceptive Informatics, recently stayed at a property in which housekeeping seemed to counteract the hotel's stated policies.

“There were those little cards that hotels place out, saying to leave [linens] on the bed and they will just remake it or to hang towels and they won't wash them,” Sudore says. “I hung my towels and left the ‘just make my bed’ note on the bed the next morning. When I returned to the room, I noticed that the towels had been replaced. I know this because the one I used the day before had a frayed edge. Being curious to see if they were really trying to be green, I unfolded all the towels. No frayed edge on any.”

In addition, Sudore's room contained a two-compartment wastebasket that included one side marked for trash and one side marked for recycling. During her stay, she placed a few items in both compartments, separated accordingly. Upon her return, she noticed something peculiar.

“I went to put something in the recycle part of the wastebasket and saw that the maid had put a plastic bag in the wastebasket to block using the recycle bin,” she says. “Apparently, he [or] she did not want to bother with that, and I ended up taking anything that could be recycled to the convention center to put in their bins.”

On the last day of her stay, Sudore says, housekeeping finally abided by her wishes and left her used towels hanging, as she had arranged them.

“Maybe some maids are green and some aren't!” Sudore says. “It just bugs me when a hotel has all these little cards that tell you how to help them to be green, when they don't even follow it. I'm sure a lot of people fall for this. Those of us who know better are aware of having the wool—or in this case, towel—pulled over our faces.”

Part of the trouble that allows greenwashing practices to exist is the sheer volume of products on the market, which exacerbates confusion over what, exactly, defines the “greenest choice.” This confusion can be seen in the ongoing debate among event planners and suppliers over whether or not bottled water is an acceptable accompaniment for a group gathering, Cataldo says.

“You can now get products that are intrinsically a terrible idea, like Fuji water, shipped halfway across the planet and wrapped in plastic, but where big efforts are made to offset the damage,” he says. “Some people will see that as greenwashing, and others won't. Sometimes, greenwashing involves out-and-out lies, but, more often, greenwashing is going to be subjective. If some event or product claims to be green, are their actions worthy of the claim?”

Confusion over what is and is not green can sometimes cause buyers of deceitful products or services to inadvertently perpetuate the occurrence and scope of greenwashing. Midori Connolly, owner of sustainable technical production support provider Pulse Staging and Events, recalls the unfortunate result of what she refers to as a “favorite” example of the Sin of Fibbing.

“An A/V supplier informed their client they would be using Energy Star projectors,” Connolly says. “There is no such thing as an Energy Star projector! And, not knowing any better, the poor client actually put the claim all over their website. So, through no fault of their own, they were greenwashing.”

As another example, Connolly says she commonly sees the Sin of Irrelevance in action.

“A very large A/V company has in their green policy that they use only

propane- and electric-powered scissor lifts and forklifts for setting equipment,” she says. “Hello! That’s required by law. You can’t use petrol-powered equipment indoors. There’s this whole thing called carbon monoxide, and it’s quite dangerous.”

Although due diligence is the key to differentiating between legitimate and illegitimate claims, the challenge to overcome greenwashing does not stop with buyers of “green” products or services. As awareness of such unethical practices continues to spread, those who make true green claims are more rigorously called upon to defend their validity. The antidote to greenwashing—or, for that matter, the perception of greenwashing—is simple honesty, according to Cataldo and many others involved in the move toward greener events.

“For people taking early steps toward being greener and afraid of the accusation of greenwashing, advice I heard at the GMIC's conference is what I would recommend: don't claim to be green; just describe what you are doing in an honest way, open for further suggestions and improvements,” Cataldo says.

“I don’t like to be too ‘greener-than-thou,’” Connolly adds. “There is the danger of ‘greenmuting,’ where people become so afraid of committing greenwashing that they don’t dare take the first step. I just think it’s important to disclose that it’s a process and we’re all learning as we go.”

To familiarize with TerraChoice’s “Seven Sins of Greenwashing,” visit [www.sinsofgreenwashing.org](http://www.sinsofgreenwashing.org) to download the full report.

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