

## Home, Green Home

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Some say green is the new black, with reusable bags and water containers topping the list of en vogue eco-friendly merchandise.

How consumers are embracing green is wonderful, but risky at the same time. On the one hand, supporting eco-friendly products could help millions of people live healthier lives and help safeguard the planet's natural resources for generations to come. On the other hand, green shouldn't be a "fad" or a trendy spur-of-the-moment decision. It's an ever-evolving lifestyle choice that constantly investigates better and better ways to live environmentally

conscious lives. The trend mentality opens the door for green to be more about bank accounts and less about the planet; more about what's chic than what's truly natural. With the scene set in this manner, misconceptions surface and unscrupulous companies step in to cash in on the green market.

"Since the 'green movement' has taken off in the last few years, even S.C. Johnson and Proctor & Gamble have jumped onto the bandwagon, with increasing profits in mind, changing only their outside packaging to 'look' like they are green-conscious, but not changing the chemical make-up inside their household products," says Mia Palencar, owner and president of Mia Rose, Newport Beach, CA.

Luckily, the natural products industry, with its roots firmly planted in green living, offers some truly environmentally friendly products that can help shoppers live with sustainability in mind. This article will address some of the misconceptions that surround the market of eco-friendly household items so that retailers can help shoppers navigate the green market, which, at times, may seem a muddy shade of brown.

### **Misconception #1: There's No Way to Tell if a Cleaning Product is Truly Green**

Unfortunately, there's a nugget of truth in this statement. Since there is no standard definition for "natural," some companies claim to sell environmentally friendly products, but, in actuality, create formulas with chemical- and petroleum-based ingredients. Or, they allude to being natural while using perfumes, dyes and phthalates as fragrances rather than essential oils so as to increase their profitability.

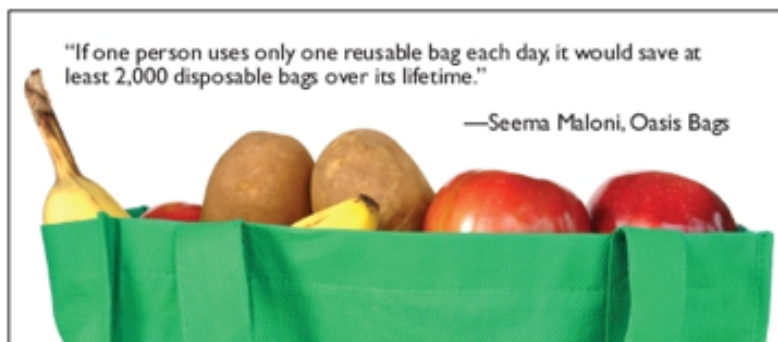
"Not only is this dishonest, but by still having harmful toxic ingredients in these products, companies are putting consumers at risk, exposing them to cancer-causing substances such as phosphates, petrochemicals, formaldehyde, 1,4 dioxane, caustics, chlorine bleach, ammonia and other toxins," says Kelly Vlahakis-Hanks, vice president of Earth Friendly Products, Winnetka, IL. Other chemicals cause problems, too. Phthalates, for instance, have been linked to increased incidence of attention disorders and poor neurodevelopment in children (see page 13).

To help distinguish between companies that are green washing and those that are washing green, industry has several third-party seals at its (eco-friendly) disposal. Several companies interviewed for this article say their products are certified through the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)'s Design for the Environment (DfE) program. This program—unlike most—is free, although the process is "long and stringent," says Cindy Rimer, vice president of sales and marketing, Biokleen Industries, Inc., Vancouver, WA.

Rimer explains that the EPA standard isn't just about a seal; it also is about improving the end product. The EPA reviews formulas, production processes and comments on options for alternative ingredients. "This up-to-date research offers a valuable resource to companies. Not only do companies go through a stringent certification process to meet standards, but they also have the opportunity to better their product," Rimer says.

In addition to the EPA seal, other standards include the Green Seal, the Environmental Choice EcoLogo Program and the newly launched Natural Products Association Natural Standard for Home Care Products (see page 8).

Many companies opt to use more than one standard combined with independent testing. Philip Coffey, CEO of OMI Industries, Barrington, IL, uses the Fresh Wave/Ecosorb brands as an example. "Standards are necessary to ensure safety and maintain the validity of products that are eco-friendly...The products have been tested according to the EPA guidelines and in-vitro ocular irritation (non-animal) assay. Additionally, data from independent laboratories and researchers prove that Fresh Wave products are effective for all kinds of odors and are safe for people, pets and the environment."



But there's one problem with having all these seals: each has slightly different requirements. "Which one is the standard?" asks Steve Zeitler, co-founder of Citra Solv. "Which one is correct? Which one is the most meaningful? Which one is the fairest?" Plus, when the category has an over-saturation of seals, it's unlikely that consumers will understand the ins and outs of all of them, no less truly appreciate what

they stand for. Essentially, some interviewed for this article feel that the seals elicit more confusion than clarification.

Therefore, another viewpoint is that industry-wide certification would be extremely helpful in this market and would create something that consumers can truly trust. Says Pam Helms, head of research and development at Mrs. Meyer's Clean Day, Minneapolis, MN, "We do believe that a standard needs to be established to help build confidence and credibility in the brands that are making better products for our families, pets and the environment. We support efforts to develop a national standard for this reason and to help cut through the clutter of 'green seals' that quite honestly have created almost as much confusion as the claims that green-washers are using."

One idea from Zeitler is that such a standard would be akin to the U.S. Department of Agriculture organic seal—both in prestige and industry-wide acceptance.

Another angle is to focus on required ingredient lists. At present, manufacturers don't have to list all the ingredients in their products. This means that it's easy to hide ingredients that companies don't want consumers to see (unless they're active disinfectants or potentially hazardous). Thus, Palencar says her company "recognizes the need for set standards for claims of organic, as well as complete ingredient listings, for all household product divisions. This is very important for the protection of the chemically sensitive and environmentally ill, as well as allergy-prone individuals, young children, and our pets."

Palencar isn't alone in her belief about all ingredients appearing on product labels. Says Justine Lopez, marketing coordinator at Howard Products, Paso, Robles, CA, "It is the right of the consumer to feel absolutely safe when making their purchasing decisions. Natural is a very broad term. That is why we, as a company, choose to list our ingredients on our labels, so you know what you are getting."

Despite the push for this, it should be noted that other firms fear it would sacrifice the identity of proprietary blends.

A third way of dealing with the seals and certification situation is to handle it internally. For example, Seventh Generation, Burlington, VT, went to the extent of making its own "Standards and Policies for Cleaners" that has an evolving definition of "natural" and sets standards for environmental health and human safety. This two-pronged approach is important, says Chrystie Heimert, director of communications at Seventh Generation, because "'natural' is not defined legally, and different companies use the word on their products and in their advertising in different ways."

Though Seventh Generation participated in creating NPA's Natural Standard for Home Care Products, the company probably will not display the seal. "The primary reason for this is that Seventh Generation has its own Policies and Standards for Cleaners that are more all-encompassing than the NPA standard. We are concerned that displaying the NPA seal will suggest we are at parity with other products that display the NPA seal when, in fact, we rise to a higher standard," says Heimert, noting that the company does not allow the use of volatile organic compounds, chlorine or sodium hypochlorite, for example, whereas the NPA Standard doesn't outright prohibit them.

Until labeling guidelines are established, Rimer feels that one way of telling consumers their product is green is to have a "Contains No" list on products "so if a consumer is particularly worried about a specific ingredient, they can go straight to this and don't have to worry about second-guessing."

In the end, seals shouldn't be seen as the finish line in the green race. "The bar can always be set higher," says Kipling Wagner, assistant marketing manager at Ecover, Commerce, CA. "Sometimes, standards mean a label to attain and then the effort ceases." Instead, companies should continuously aim to re-evaluate their environmental efforts in all aspects of their business—from procurement of materials, to formulating, to packaging, to shipping.

Also believing that every aspect of a green product should be green, Avi Tansman, president of A World of Wipes, Boca Raton, FL, raises the point that wet wipes, for example, often have "natural cheaters." There absolutely should be a standard. At this point, it's an open field...I feel it's deceiving the public," he says. Many don't consider the material of the wipe itself, the approach to which is "almost a hidden aspect of the industry," says Tansman. "Everyone looks at the liquid, but what about the cloth that eventually will be disposed? I think what it is made of is a crucial issue." He adds, "If we go to any of those seals, the cloth is a less relative issue for some reason."

Tansman's company uses 100% natural and organic cotton in its wipes, whereas others, he says, use 10% or less. "This does not serve the purpose," he says. Some other materials used by the company include those that are wood pulp derived with no latex or other additives.

### **Misconception #2: Green Cleaners Don't Work as Well as the Mainstream**

According to Wagner, this misconception is a holdover from some of the original ecological cleaners of the 1980s. "It's been 30 years!" he states. "Science has allowed us extraordinary advances, allowing us to change our approach to ecological cleaning."

Adding support to this thought is Lopez, who says, "with so many advancements in vegetable-based ingredients, they are just as effective as chemical-based cleansers."

Zeitler offers some hard analysis to the discussion. A well-known consumer product-testing magazine pitted his product (Citra Drain) against some chemical drain cleaners and ranked it number one.

Other comparison studies come from Vlahakis-Hanks of Earth Friendly Products, who says that her company has a team of chemists dedicated to ensuring their products work as well as their mainstream counterparts. An outside laboratory also tests whether the products stack up. "According to a third-party test, our dishwashing gel, Wave, works just as well as Cascade. It's our mission to show consumers, that 'green' doesn't mean 'hardly works,'" she states.

So, what exactly is in those cleaners? With respect to dishwashing detergent, the focus at Earth Friendly Products is making the formula pH-neutral. "Most dishwashing gels have pH of 12-13, the same as liquid plumber. There is no need to have such aggressive dishwashing gel to get dishes clean," says Vlahakis-Hanks. The main cleaning agent in her firm's cleaner (ECOS) is 100% natural anionic coconut kernel oil, "which is gentle on skin and safe for the planet."

At Mrs. Meyer's, sugars, coconut oil, palm oil, soy beans and corn are used to make surfactants. Says Helms, "Through a series of processing steps the ingredients are transformed into effective materials that clean as well as ingredients derived from petroleum when they are used at appropriate ratios."

Another hard-working cleaning ingredient is enzymes. "What's nice about biologicals," says Zeitler, "is that they eat and digest materials that clog drains" such as hair, oils and soap scum. They build colonies of safe bacteria, which create the enzymes that digest the clog-forming materials. "That's the best way to go for draining," says Zeitler. "It's a newer technology." For stain removal on fabric and carpets, specially designed natural enzymes take away blood and urine, for instance. "The enzymes change the chemical molecules and completely eliminate the smell because it removes the uric acid. They turn the stain into safe liquid waste," Zeitler explains.

Acidic-based materials like vinegar help break up rust. At A World of Wipes, vinegar is used along with lavender, rosemary and other natural extracts.

Water is also an important component of many cleansers, but Rimer notes her company uses less water and fillers. The end product is more concentrated, and has threefold benefits: better cleaning performance, more economical and more environmentally friendly (saves water, requires less packaging and conserves energy in production and shipping). The firm also uses 100% green energy in its plant. "Effective products don't need to contain toxic chemicals and disinfectants such as petrochemical surfactants, chlorine, solvents and acids to be effective," says Rimer.

Energy usage is a concern for making truly eco-friendly products. Wagner notes that some plant-based surfactants take a lot of energy to make. So, the firm developed a surfactant from yeast (*Candida bombicola*) "that is not only a better cleaner, but also is 100% biodegradable."

### **Misconception #3: Paper Bags Are Okay for the Environment**

The environmental impact of bags is flanked with confusing data. "Everything and everybody have multiple environmental impacts. Some impacts are positive, others are negative. The challenge of weighing the true net-impact of a product over time is complicated but deserves our attention and consideration," says Andy Keller, inventor and president of ChicoBag Company, Chico, CA.

It requires more energy to produce and deliver heavier paper bags than plastic ones. Paper bags biodegrade whereas plastic does not, some say, while others report that nothing breaks down quickly in modern landfills. So, what's better? Paper or plastic?

Neither, says Seema Maloni, vice president of operations at Oasis Bags, Vaudreuil-Dorion, QC, Canada. "Paper and plastic bags are equally bad for the environment as plastic bags take a minimum of 50 years to degrade and paper bags highly pollute upon manufacturing and release gases when degrading."



And, few plastic bags are recycled, according to Keller. "Less than 5% of plastics ever get recycled," he states. "The recycling of single-use bags is on the rise and it appears to be one of the few success stories aside from PET bottles. However despite this success, recycling rates are still disturbingly low and ultimately, we can't recycle our way out of an incredibly inefficient and damaging system."

The solution is reusable bags, industry insiders feel. "A good-quality reusable bag can be used for at least two years. If one person uses only one bag each day, it saves at least 2,000 disposable bags over its lifetime," says Maloni.

Getting people to bring bags to stores can be a challenge. Keller suggests that the reason why is that there is no penalty for forgetting them. "Free single-use bags are provided at almost every store...Also, the environmental damage created is too abstract and distant," he states, offering up this solution: "The 50-year-old tradition of unlimited FREE single-use bags needs to end in order for humanity to truly adopt a healthy reusable bag habit." Since stores worry that making this change will work against them in terms of consumer backlash, he suggests that local, state or federal laws may work better.

#### **Misconception #4: Reusable Bags Aren't Cost Effective for Small Stores**

Reusable bags are now available in a slew of different shapes, sizes and colors. Many can be customized with store logos, which may make retailers question whether they are cost effective to carry. Says Maloni, "Compared to plastic bags which must be bought by the retailer and then given away (and often thrown away after a one-time use), a reusable bag is bought and then sold by the retailer (for a profit versus loss)." And, retailers benefit from mobile publicity when shoppers use them elsewhere.

For retailers looking for tips on how to make themselves more profitable in this area, Lisa Foster, president of 1 Bag at a Time, Inc., Los Angeles, CA, suggests they consider "profit" in a new light. "A fair price for a fair bag is a good deal," she states, adding, "Natural store owners who want a bag with a conscience should take a profit with a conscience, too."

But this doesn't mean you can't do well financially. Foster recommends ordering as many bags as you think will last you for an entire year, since buying in bulk saves the money. And, change the look every year, even if it's just a new color or style, so it doesn't get stale. "Just like any other product, shoppers won't notice it if you offer the same product over and over," she feels. "Try to think about offering something different each year to appeal to a wider variety of customers."

Keller feels stores should have an assortment of bags (some with logos some without) in various brands, colors, styles, sizes and materials. "Make reusable bags a well thought-out category instead of a me-too, check-box response to regulatory pressure," he suggests.

Last, in order to make the most out of your bags, customers have to reuse them. Foster suggests creating an incentive program, or tying it in with a charity (e.g., five cents for every reusable bag brought into the store during May will be given to a food pantry).

And, train cashiers to offer shoppers reusable bags at checkout, rather than just giving out plastic bags by reflex. Suggests Keller, "A sales-boosting question is: "Would you like us to bag your groceries in a reusable bag for an additional \$5.00?"

#### **Misconception #5: Eco-Friendly Disposable Items Are Limited and Pricey**

Stores that have cafés and customers needing disposable plates, cups and utensils need not worry about the selection of Styrofoam and paper product alternatives. There are many new, interesting materials for this category such as: polylactic acid (PLA) or corn plastic, sugarcane (Bagasse), post-consumer recycled fiber (PCF) paperboard, recycled PET (RPET), crystalized PLA (has a higher heat tolerance than standard PLA) and plant starch. "All of them have a responsible resource-use benefit because they all come from either renewable or recycled materials," Wendell Simonson, marketing communications manager of Eco-Products, Boulder, CO, explains. "Some also have a waste diversion benefit because they are compostable, though none of these materials are considered recyclable at this time because they are not accepted in a majority of municipal recycling facilities."

Flimsy products can be avoided with the use of RPET, says Simonson. "RPET is inherently more durable, has a higher heat tolerance than the majority of bio-based solutions, and is less expensive." And if composting isn't an option, starch-based cutlery made with renewable material are durable and withstand heat well, he says. Though some have other fillers, they "help keep the cost closer to conventional offerings."

This last point about price is well taken, since many shoppers shy away from such products because of the cost. "The reality we face is that bio-based materials are going to be more expensive than conventional options for the foreseeable future, so it is important for manufacturers to offer their customers products made from renewable as well as recycled materials because consumers can access the environmental benefits of products made from recycled materials at a better price point than the offerings on the renewable side," Simonson feels. **WF**

## Select Eco-Friendly Products.

**A World of Wipes:** Branded (Wipex, Germ-Away) and private label pre-moistened wipes and toillettes.

**Biokleen:** Laundry detergent, oxygen bleach, dish washing products, produce wash, drain care, fabric freshener, spray cleaners, odor eliminator, soy-based cleaners and more.

**ChicoBag:** Compact reusable bags, messenger bags, back packs and totes that are fashionable and environmentally friendly. Some are made with recycled materials.



**Citra Solv:** Citra Solv, Citra Dish Liquid, Citra Spot Enzymatics, Citra Suds Liquid Concentrate, Citra Suds Powder and more.

**Earth Friendly Products:** ECOS laundry detergent, Wave Auto Dish Gel, Dishmate, Parsley Plus All-Purpose Cleaner, Window Cleaner, Eco Breeze, Furniture Polish, Stain & Odor Remover, Orange Plus (all purpose cleaner), Carpet Shampoo, OxoBrite, Zainz (pre-treatment for spots and stains) and more.

**Eco-Products:** Hot cups, cold cups, cutlery, dinnerware and food containers made from renewable resources.

**Ecover:** Kitchen products (all-purpose cleaner, floor soap, glass/surface cleaner, dish cleaner and more), Bathroom products (bathroom cleaner, toilet cleaner and limescale remover).

**Howard Products:** Furniture and kitchen care cleaners.

**Mia Rose:** Citri-Glow cleaners and degreasers, Air Therapy, Airoma Mister.

**Mrs. Meyer's Clean Day:** Dish soap, counter sprays, wipes, surface scrub, all-purpose cleaners, toilet bowl cleaner, room freshener, window spray and more.

**Oasis Bags:** Reusable woven/non-woven polypropylene bags, cotton bags, canvas bags, mesh bags, LDPE biodegradable bags, wine bags and aprons.

**OMI Industries:** Fresh Wave odor-elimination product line includes Crystal Gels, Soy Candles, Sprays, Pearl Packs, a Carpet Shake, Vacuum Pearls, a Multi-Purpose Additive and a Pet Shampoo.

**One Bag at a Time:** Reusable bags in various designs such as biodegradable jute, reusable wine bag, cooler totes and standard shopping bags.

**Seventh Generation:** Disinfectants, laundry detergents, multi-surface cleaner, carpet spot and stain remover, all-purpose cleaner, natural glass and surface cleaner, shower cleaner, tub and tile cleaner and more.