

Greenwashing or Good Shopping?

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Living amidst the chaotic web of human consumption versus resource depletion and destruction, being a consumer can often feel confusing and hopeless. Demands for one's moral attention are at every corner when companies are frequently accused of ploys like greenwashing – an exploitation of the growing need for sustainable products by simply presenting themselves as environmentally sound, rather than doing the real work to be so.

The result is often ironic, usually colouring well-known disposable and wasteful products such as plastic bags or disposable razors green – trying to depict them as “natural”, while also stamping the word “eco” or “bio” in front of the brand's name. It can be flashy narratives of ethically sourced and reusable fibres, or stamps of approval that claim they are doing restoration, covering up the reality that these companies are nowhere near an environmentally net-positive or neutral effect.

However, there are certain harsh realities that exist in the underlying structure of our economic system. For example, let's imagine a small business owner who does their best to source all of their materials ethically and locally: there can still be unavoidable environmental costs, so it is difficult to determine what is greenwashing and what is merely a lack of better solutions. How far should one go when scrutinizing certain claims?

Ethics and corporations can often be like oil and water. A company's presentation of its “green” products is tainted by the base desire to produce items that cost the planet finite resources. At a certain point, one can only do their best in trying to find products that are mostly sustainable. So how as consumers can we vote with our dollar and pressure companies to do better? How might one navigate the complex maze of determining what good shopping is despite greenwashing?



A few straightforward things to look for are third party certifications, transparency and clear goals. Identifications such as B-corp certification (bcorporation.net) or Ecologo (ul.com) can help indicate if a company has worked to keep up to a certain environmental standard. Additionally, if a company is transparent about how they operate it is easier to determine whether or not they are making sustainable products. However, sometimes with larger corporations, it is difficult to know if they are truthful in their ecological claims, so shopping locally allows one to have the opportunity to get to know a company more intimately and decide whether or not they deliver environmentally friendly products. Finally, a company should be able to demonstrate its goals and how its products are actively sustainable. For example, if a product has unnecessary packaging or uses eco-friendly buzzwords such as biodegradable, organic, and net-carbon, rather than describing the way their product is sustainable, this is a good indicator of greenwashing. What about the product is actually reducing its impact on the environment? Does the company have a clear plan and goal for reducing their impact?

Ecologically aware shopping can sometimes feel futile and pointless. But the reality is one can only be as good a shopper as the products they have access to. Avoiding greenwashing is the best we can do as consumers, but it is up to the companies themselves to provide access to better and more sustainable products.

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