

Assessment of Green Claims on Product Packaging

Project Summary

In the past five years, the marketplace has seen a proliferation of “green” claims promoting environmental features or benefits of many consumer products. In addition to the rise in the overall number of claims, there has been a wider variety of claims observed. If green claims are ambiguous or misleading there is a danger that consumers may become cynical and resist buying products on environmental or ethical grounds. Defra’s Green Claims Code (GCC) is a guidance tool for both consumers and businesses, developed to promote the creation and use of clear and credible environmental claims on products. It is currently being updated. Ahead of this, Defra wanted to assess the current ‘state of play’ by collating data on the frequency, type and specific terminology of green claims found in marketing and on product packaging, of which this study looks at the latter.

Key Findings

- **Claims are widespread.** From 3,234 items, 4,492 claims were observed in total. 63% of the items sampled had at least one green claim. However this reduced to 41% if advisory claims that could be said to not infer an environmental benefit, such as ‘please recycle’, were excluded. When an item had at least one green claim, the average was 2.2 claims per item.
- **The frequency of green claims varied by product or service.** 5 products (*cars, household surface cleaners, bottled water, baby food & paint*) had at least one green claim on every item viewed. A further 7 (*Shampoo, milk, baby lotion, nappies, washing machines, fabrics washing products & windows*) had at least one green claim on 90% of items viewed. Overall, over two thirds of the 32 different products and services sampled had a green claim on over 50% of the items viewed.
- **Recycle claims were the most common, and were three times higher than the next nearest (*General and Efficiency*).** 42% of claims referred to the recyclability of the product or its packaging. 97% of these applied to the packaging material or the hang tag, not to the product itself (compared to 56% over all types of claims). 93% of recycling claims were a symbol or logo. The Green Dot refers to a packaging recovery scheme not accredited in the UK, as opposed to the recyclability of the product or packaging, but was included in this category as it is often perceived by consumers to relate to recycling. Importantly it was also frequently seen; making up 57% of recycling claims (and so 24% of all claims).
- **Consumers will see a wide variety of claims on a typical shopping trip.** *Fabric washing products, T-shirts, jackets, cars & household surface cleaner* had the highest number of different claims. Conversely, *WC’s and lipstick* only had one type of claim (*water-* and *recycle*-based, respectively).
- **It’s an even split between claims referring to the product or packaging – but only because recycling claims are so numerous.** 56% of all claims referred to the product, not the packaging but that figure would be a lot higher were it not for recycling claims about packaging making up 41% of all claims.
- **Third-party logos are widespread, self-made logos are not.** 53% of all claims are third-party logos, which were found on at least one item on nearly 75% of all products. 36% of these are verified, in that they comply with a code or set of criteria checked by an independent organisation. Only 2% of all claims were self-made by the company making the claim.
- **Many claims could be argued as not inferring a product’s environmental benefit.** Claims such as ‘please recycle’ or the Mobius Loop, which suggests a product can be recycled, arguably do not claim a specific benefit. These types of claims made up 44% of all claims seen. Most referred to recycling or

recyclability and, when removed, 11 of the 32 different product types surveyed had the numbers of claims observed on them drop by 50% or more.

- **Environmental images were displayed to the consumer in many, but not all, product sectors.** About two-thirds of the 32 products and services had at least one inferred claim, mainly images of nature. All of the products and services surveyed on the internet used environmental imagery.

Methodology

10 market sectors, and 32 products within them, were picked in order to provide a representative snapshot of an average shopping experience. This was done through a literature review, existing Defra priority products and the researchers' previous experience. Mystery shoppers entered 30 stores over 5 days and sampled green claims on 3,234 individual items from those 32 products. 100 internet shopping sites were also accessed. The resulting 4,492 claims were analysed by product/service, claim type (divided into 13 categories, including 'recycle', 'air', 'general' etc), specific representation (logo, wording, imagery) and what the claim referred to (product or packaging). A further 5 claims from each of the 13 claim categories (65 in total) were analysed further to look at any additional information provided on the claim.

Robustness

The 3,234 items sampled were picked randomly and in most cases, covered all the possible brands of the identified product available on the shelf or website. The large sample size means that the resulting findings should be considered very robust for the products sampled. The findings based on the 65 claims picked for further investigation were to provide only a snapshot of the further information available to consumers, and so could not be considered truly robust.

Limitations

Although the findings from the 3,234 items sampled are considered very robust, it is not assumed, for example, that the 4 personal care products surveyed (292 different items in total) are representative of all personal care products, only that it represents what an average consumer might look at on an average shopping trip. It is also difficult to draw any conclusions about whether mandatory claim requirements are encouraging further green claims, as the exact percentage of mandatory claims in this study depended on the sectors chosen for sampling. The judgement of a claim as 'green' was made by the mystery shoppers and will be subjective. For some analyses the researchers have included advisory claims, such as 'please recycle' or 'this product is recyclable', where others may consider such claims not 'green'. However, where this is the case it is made clear. Also, environmental benefits inferred from imagery may be wrongly categorised if the brand only intended to suggest a link with nature. However, it is felt that these limitations do not call the overall project findings into question.

Further Information

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Full Report available at:

www.defra.gov.uk/environment/business/scp/evidence/theme2/products0910.htm