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Product promotions play on concern for environment



Recently, the Washington-based Anderson Diaper Co. was charged with violating that state's Consumer Protection Act because the company's ads claimed to offer an environmentally friendly diaper recycling service and it was actually dumping most of the diapers it received into a landfill.

This is one example of a twisted new way to promote a product — use an "Eco-Ad" to play on people's genuine concern for the environment.

Surveys of U.S. consumers demonstrate the importance of products being green: 89 percent of consumers are concerned about the environmental impact of products they buy; 53 percent have refused to purchase a product within the past year because of that item's environmental impact; and 75 percent would pay 5 percent more for environmentally friendly products.

No longer a specialty of small alternative stores, green products represent a large market share for U.S.

businesses, which realize that being perceived as environmentally friendly can be an enormous competitive advantage.

"Just as the '80s saw a proliferation of 'light' products designed to meet growing health awareness, the '90s will be the decade of 'green' products," predicts Dorothy Mackenzie, head of product development for the Michael Peters Groups.

Unfortunately, many companies are not working to lessen the environmental impact of their products, but they are just giving themselves a "greenwash." A few have been caught in the act:

■ The makers of Hefty trash bags were sued by seven states for false advertising when they promoted "degradable" bags. These bags actually only degrade when exposed to plenty of light, water and air — elements not common deep in a landfill.

■ McDonald's printed the well-known recycling symbol along with the words "Recycled Paper" on one

of its food containers. The container, which is no longer in use, was not made from recycled paper and couldn't even be recycled because of a label glued to the back.

■ Fully aware that many Americans know that disposable diapers cause a huge solid waste problem, American Enviro Products promoted its Bunnies diapers as "biodegradable in three to five years ... before your child grows up." This claim is true only if the diapers are disposed of in composting facilities — which are unavailable to most Americans.

■ Bristol-Myers advertised that its aerosols were "environmentally safe," when in fact they contribute to smog and air pollution.

If you want to shop with the environment in mind, and you should, there are a few labels and sources that you can trust. The Green seal is given to environmentally friendly products by the not-for-profit group of the same name. This organization has ties with national environmental groups and leaders. More important, it doesn't have a vested interest in the success of the products; it evaluates products solely on their environmental impact.

Additionally, the Good Earthkeeping Pledge seal is awarded by the Environmental Institute to companies

that pledge to follow the Good Earth-keeping code — meet environmental regulations, reduce pollutions and increase recycling.

As Los Angeles lawyer George Schulman recently pointed out, "Seals are only as meaningful as the group behind them." This might be the situation with a label known as the Green Cross. This seal is awarded by grocery stores to products that are made from recycled materials. Because the stores have a direct interest in the sale of these products, there is a potential conflict of interest.

The only way to avoid confusions over "Eco-Ads" is to educate yourself so that you can make informed decisions. Many resources are available for those interested in environmentally sound shopping. For starters, consult: "The Green Consumer" by John Elkington, Julia Hailes and Joel Makower; "Save our Planet" by Diane MacEachern; and "Shopping for A Better World" by The Council on Economic Priorities.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.