

Being Smart About Being Green



Pipe Designers and Installers Seek Third-party Certification to Verify Environmentally Sound Products

By Tera Arthur

As more municipalities mandate environmental purchasing policies, how are managers to distinguish between brazen greenwashing and the legitimate claims of environmentally responsible manufacturers? One answer is a serious, third party audited certification that provides transparency, allowing managers to verify specific claims.

The lack of standards to date has allowed widespread, inaccurate claims to proliferate. Various studies of these claims indicate that 80 to 95 percent of environmental claims on consumer products are misleading, only partially true or outright falsehoods. While statistics are unavailable on the validity of green claims for products used to create the built environment, a brief review of green advertising targeting architects and engineers indicates that a similar finding should be expected. For instance, a product may be recyclable or contain recycled materials, but if it is manufactured using Stockholm Chemicals or vast amounts of water and energy, it can hardly be considered a “green” product.

Greenwashing is defined as “disinformation disseminated by an organization so as to present an environmentally

responsible public image.” It has become so common that various entities have published their own version of the most common offenses. The Seven Sins of Greenwashing, by TerraChoice, The 10-Signs of Greenwash, by Futera Marketing and Greenwash Criteria by Greenpeace are just a few examples. Guidance from Jane Hoffman and Michael Hoffman writing in Scientific American includes, “it is always best to look behind the ‘green’ facade to get the facts.”

Most managers are already time-starved and don’t have the resources available to research and vet each of the products they specify. So, auditing and certification of these claims was the next logical step in the continuing transition from the industrial-age to an environmentally aware, sustainable society.

There is a variety of certifiers or endorsers of environmental claims with widely varying levels of credibility. Some of these companies offer little more than paid endorsements. Some actually make the effort to apply rigorous standards, but without transparency of both process and result, it is difficult to distinguish one from the other. The sheer number of companies offering this kind of

**“Stockholm Chemicals”
are persistent organic
pollutants identified at the
Stockholm Convention
in 2001.**

certification has become one more obstacle to intelligent decision making for managers attempting to make environmentally responsible purchasing choices.

Standards for the green infrastructure marketplace are just now being created. One model for establishing these standards has been proposed by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC). After 19 years, the USGBC's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program has become the accepted standard for architectural projects from residential to commercial buildings. LEED has established a consistent set of criteria and become the accepted yardstick for environmental design and construction of structures.

Critical Components of Credibility for Environmental Claims*

- No Stockholm Chemicals used or produced
- Feedstock Inventory Documented
- Energy Inventory
- Environmental Management System & Policy
- Lifecycle Assessment
- Operational Reclamation and/or Sustainable Reuse Program
- Performance Durability

*Required elements of SMaRT Certification

One example of a credible certification program that follows the model established by the USGBC is Market Transformation to Sustainability's (MTS) Sustainable Materials Rating Technology (SMaRT) for products. Similar to the LEED system for building components, it is a transparent, third party certification program that considers the triple bottom line of environmental, social and economic costs. The SMaRT standard analyzes the impacts of a product's entire lifecycle, from raw materials extraction to manufacturing and transportation through end-use, disposal or recycling. The transparency of the program means anyone can look at a scorecard and make their own evaluations based on their own priorities. The certification becomes a tool that empowers managers to make informed purchasing decisions.

SMaRT incorporates 48 single attribute standards with requirements at all product stages for public health and environment, renewable energy and energy efficiency, recycled or bio-based content, water efficiency, social equity, facility data, reuse and innovation. MTS is an American National Standards Institute (ANSI) accredited and audited standards developer. The SMaRT certification process requires an ISO 14001 compliant Life Cycle Analysis as an integral part of the background data used for the application. It is also approved for credit under USGBC's LEED rating system.

The forms and process that a manufacturer must complete in order to be considered for certification, are consistently applied and scored by the board of MTS. As an organization seeking to be one of the most widely recognized and accepted benchmarks for credible environmental claims, they are motivated to keep the standards quite high. The National Clay Pipe Institute (NCPI) was looking for exactly this kind of verification of their long-standing environmental claims.

"We wanted a serious, third party certification that would meet the criteria of our scientifically sophisticated and appropriately skeptical specifier," said Mike VanDine, president of NCPI. "The SMaRT certification from MTS met the rigorous scientific criterion this organization and our decision makers demand. We knew we had the most sustainable pipe product available, but we wanted a credible third party validation of the facts."

In the fall of 2011, NCPI and the products of its member companies were awarded SMaRT Gold certification. They joined a select group of manufacturers, including AkzoNobel, Eaton, Phillips, Milliken and Knoll who have taken a strong leadership position for both sustainability and transparency of their environmental claims. "We're proud to be the first infrastructure product to achieve a SMaRT Gold certification," VanDine said.

Mike Italiano, CEO of MTS and one of the original founders of USGBC, said "clay pipe achieved a good score in its NCPI SMaRT Sustainable Product Certification because the product comes from natural materials and protects public health and environment with no toxicity over its life cycle. Clay pipe is also extremely durable and long lasting."

The SMaRT standard continues to evolve (just as the LEED system does) to serve the needs of its constituents. "SMaRT 5.0 proposed amendments that are under development to primarily ensure that Platinum and Gold SMaRT Certified products achieve at least 25 percent renewable power or 25 percent conventional energy reduction," Italiano said.

Environmental responsibility is becoming the minimum expectation of our communities, but the landscape for environmental responsibility continues to evolve while false or misleading claims exist. This presents an ongoing challenge to any manager attempting to adhere to preferential purchasing policies. One way to ensure legitimate compliance with municipal environmental mandates is to seek out products with transparent, audited environmental certifications.

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For More Information:

- ncpi.org
- mts.sustainableproducts.com
- usgbc.org
- usgbc.org/leed
- ansi.org
- terrachoice.com
- greenpeace.org
- futerra.co.uk
- pops.int (Stockholm Convention)