



Building Success 101

Q: What does the Energy Star endorsement mean to me?

A: [Energy Star](#) is a federal program managed jointly by the EPA and the Department of Energy to identify, verify, and promote products (including entire homes) that save energy. While a terrific and legitimate gauge of a product's energy performance, the program does not delve into issues of the product's manufacturing, packaging, or transportation—all of which has environmental impact. We suggest using the Energy Star standards as one measure (albeit a very good one) of a product's overall environmental

5 Ways to Avoid Greenwashing

Sadly, going "green" isn't always about the environment or conserving energy. Companies in and out of the housing industry make claims that their products offer environmental benefits -- such as fewer toxins, recycled content, or resource efficiencies -- but fail to back them up with independent testing, quantified results, or other forms of verification.

In many cases, such claims are simply misstated or overstated in an effort to grab your attention and sell products. Words and terms such as "eco-friendly" or "environmentally sensitive," while catchy and conveying a certain benefit, have no true basis in fact.

In fewer cases, the claims are intended to deceive you; the company is simply jumping on the green bandwagon without the proper documentation and worse, little sincere concern for the environmental impact of its products. The goal is to cash in on the green movement, not contribute to it.

In both cases, the effect is called "greenwashing." It's something we as professional builders confront all the time with our suppliers. And while it's our job to ferret out true and impactful environmental claims from those that are greenwashed before we offer those benefits to you for your new-home project, we encourage our homeowners to take initiative and protect themselves, as well.

Here are some tactics you may find useful to avoid greenwashing:

- **Ask questions!** With a little digging online or perhaps on the phone with the manufacturer, you can discover the details of how a product is made and quantify its green claims. If there is recycled content, for instance, you should be able to find out how much and from what sources; if the product claims to save water, the amount of anticipated savings based on a baseline of use should be accessible.
- **Look for a label.** Not all sincerely green products are certified by a reputable third-party, such as the EPA's WaterSense or the federal Energy Star programs (among several), but such labeling is a good (and easy) piece of the puzzle. These programs verify quantifiable claims made by the manufacturer regarding their environmental impact. If you see a label you don't recognize, look it up online for more details and likely a list of certified products.

performance and benefits.

- **Beware of hidden tradeoffs.** Many products tout a narrow definition of an environmental benefit but with a tradeoff somewhere else, such as a product that uses recycled content but also contains or uses formaldehyde or adhesives that emit volatile organic compounds (VOCs). We also look at things like packaging, distance from the source (the closer the better), and manufacturing processes that ideally reduce the environmental impact of the product beyond a single green claim.
- **Realize relevance.** The use of bad stuff like lead (in paints), chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs, in refrigerants), asbestos (in insulation and roofing products), and arsenic (used to preserve wood products) has been banned for decades. Still, some manufacturers now tout them as a "green" benefit. Something that's "lead-free" should be a given, not a sales pitch -- and certainly not considered green.
- **Trust your gut.** Common sense is always a good gauge; if something sounds too good to be true, or at least overstated or exaggerated, check it out. If you get the runaround or the company can't qualify its claims, find an alternative that satisfies your needs and goals.

As your builder, we consider it our responsibility to provide you with products and systems that perform as promised. Greenwashing gets in the way of that goal, while avoiding such claims helps deliver the environmental and resource efficiencies you expect and desire.

Warm regards,

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