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Hierarchy of Green Product Claims

“Green” product claims are commonly made by manufacturers, third-party certifiers, and organizations with databases of “green” products. They are designed to sway your opinion, and, in many cases, highlight real successes. This wave of claims is causing many people to ask “Who do I believe?” We propose there is a Hierarchy of “Green” Product Claims. The hierarchy is best represented by a pyramid.



At the base of this hierarchy are manufacturer’s claims that are vague, lack relevance, or are unsubstantiated. Some manufacturers will even claim third-party certifications that they don’t have, making it very difficult to know the truth. When in doubt, go to the third-party’s website to see if the product in question is listed, contact the certifier, or ask the manufacturer to provide a copy of the certificate.

There is nothing more frustrating to a company with legitimate claims than to see a competitor intentionally mislead customers. At Crypton, we encourage you to obtain the certificates before you buy.

In the middle of the pyramid are levels of Reliability and Relevance.

Reliability increases when parties other than the manufacturer support the claims. First-party claims are the claims made by a manufacturer. Second-party verification means another organization, such as a customer or trade group, has taken steps to have the manufacturer justify its claims. Third-party certification means an independent organization has ensured a manufacturer satisfies its criteria.

Relevance increases when (a) the criteria used to assess the “green” claims are pertinent, (b) more than one attribute is considered, and (c) the body that establishes the criteria is made up of all industry stakeholders. For example, a product’s emissions are pertinent to children and sensitive groups, but it is a single attribute. A multi-attribute standard might include emissions, material safety, and resource utilization. The other aspect of relevance pertains to the process used to establish the criteria. A standard is more relevant when it is written for a specific product. Also, more faith can be placed in a standard when it is written according to ANSI (American National Standards Institute) guidelines.

At the top of the hierarchy are claims based on ANSI standards. Such standards are product-specific, and no two ANSI standards can exist for a single product. The sustainability criteria are established by volunteers from industry, government, and users (customers). It is much more difficult to establish a product-specific standard when all stakeholders have to be represented, but it usually results in a fair and balanced tool for measuring relevant sustainability attributes. To ensure the standard is open to all companies, not just those that can afford third-party assessment, ANSI insists on allowing first-party, second-party, and third-party claims.

On one of the sides of the pyramid are the companies that collect, disseminate, and rate products as “green”. They have their own set of criteria for “green” which tends to be universal, not product-specific, so that a variety of products can be included in the database. The reliability and relevance of information in these databases is contingent upon that company’s ability to assess the various claims.

We believe customers should reserve their highest esteem for those claims that are third-party certified according to an ANSI Standard. We also encourage you to require manufacturers to provide evidence of their third-party claims.

Crypton continues to work with all industry stakeholders to develop an ANSI-based standard for commercial furnishing fabrics. Stay tuned.