

LBM JOURNAL[®]

PROFIT-BUILDING STRATEGIES FOR LUMBER/BUILDING MATERIAL PROS

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How to Avoid “Greenwashing”

If you rely on product labels to recommend green products, you'd better understand what the labels signify.

Q: ■ There's no doubt that green building is really catching on. Many people in the building industry thought that green building would be a short lived fad. It's clear now that it is becoming main stream. It seems like now no matter what the product everyone has a “green spin for their products. How does a lumber dealer or builder sort fact from fiction when buying products?

A: *In the recent economic downturn in the housing market one segment is still growing: green building. Home buyers are asking for green products. Not only do they want the cost savings from energy efficiency and water efficiency; they're also concerned about indoor air quality and resource efficiencies as well. As consumers become more environmentally conscious product manufacturers are scrambling to meet this new demand. Marketers are touting the greenness of their products to hook the customers sometimes with little or no data to back it up. One way to avoid this greenwashing affect is to look for products that have been independently certified by a green labeling program.*

Important note: the absence of a certification label doesn't mean that a product isn't green. The certification process can be very expensive, and there are many products with very green attributes that aren't labeled as green. Fortunately, by understanding what makes one product greener than another, you needn't rely totally on product labels. LBM Journal's Green Building Editor, John Wagner,

covers this topic often in his columns. Still, you will undoubtedly get questions on the various green product certifications, and it is important to understand what sets them apart.

Green Certifications

Green labeling programs, while not perfect, are a good start in introducing consistency in reporting and meeting specific program requirements. They offer third-party validation as a way to determine a product's green qualifications. Participation in green labeling programs is voluntary and can help the manufacturer stand out from the competition.

Not all green labels are created equally. Some labels focus only on one very specific aspect of green like energy or VOC's, while others consider multiple attributes before awarding certificates. Make sure you familiarize yourself with the certifications so that you are aware of what aspects of the product have been independently tested and verified as 'green.'

ENERGY STAR

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's ENERGY STAR label for products is one of the most familiar certifications. It only takes into account one attribute of the product: energy efficiency. To use the ENERGY STAR label, manufacturers must verify that they've tested their products to meet an ENERGY STAR standard. The standards usually require products to operate a specified percent more efficiently than ordinary products.



GreenGuard

The Greenguard certification program was founded in 2001 and is operated by the Greenguard Environmental Institute. Its focus is on one attribute: indoor air quality. The goal is to certify products that do not emit harmful chemicals by testing the amount of chemicals that are off-gassed once the product is installed or put into use.

Most of the Greenguard certifications are for furniture but they also certify adhesives, appliances, flooring, insulation, gypsum board, paint and wall coverings.



Green Seal

The Green Seal program was founded in 1989. Green Seal's certification is based on multiple attributes as it looks at the entire product's life cycle: raw material extraction, how it is made, performance, and maintenance and end-of-life disposal. The Green Seal goal is to set their standard so that only 20% of the manufacturers in a particular product category can achieve it. Green Seal certifies cleaners, paints, sealers, coatings, windows and doors.



Scientific Certification Systems (SCS)

Scientific Certification Systems (SCS) was founded in 1984. Originally its focus was on food and pesticides but it has since grown to focus on single attributes like indoor air quality, material content and biodegradability. The company also offers a multiple attribute certification called the Environmentally Preferable

Product (EPP) certification. This certification has 28 different criteria that must be met in categories such as energy use, depletion of materials and green house gas emissions. It is obviously a lot more difficult to achieve than their single attribute certifications. Currently EPP certification is applicable to carpet face fiber, broadloom/tile and flooring systems. SCS is in the process of expanding the EPP certification to other product categories.



Forest Stewardship Council

Manufacturers that are FSC-certified use wood harvested from FSC-certified forests. This means that the forest complies with the FSC 10 principles and 56 criteria outlining how the forest is managed to meet the social, economic ecological, cultural and spiritual needs of present and future generations.

The certification is completed by third-party organizations and it verifies the chain of custody of the wood to ensure that it came from a forest operated and harvested under principles of sustainable forestry.



Green Label & Green Label Plus

In 1992 The Carpet and Rug Institute developed the Green Label program. This program focuses on a single attribute: chemical emissions.

The certifications cover carpets, carpet adhesives and cushions designed to help facilitate good indoor air quality. Recently the CRI developed the Green Label Plus program which requires products to meet more stringent standards for emissions than the Green Label program.



MBDC's Cradle to Cradle

The Cradle to Cradle certification was developed at MBDC (McDonough Braungart Design Chemistry) a company that specializes in sustainability. This certification evaluates a product based on using environmentally safe and healthy materials; design for material reutilization, such as recycling or composting; the use of renewable energy and energy efficiency; efficient use of water, and maximum water quality associated with production; and instituting strategies for social responsibility.

Cradle to Cradle certification is applicable to a wide variety of product lines from building exteriors to interiors and even green diapers!



STEVE EASLEY is president of Steve Easley & Associates, which consults and trains on building science issues. For more information, visit www.codecollegienetwork.com.

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SUSAN M. RATERMAN, CIH THE RATERMAN GROUP, LTD. Environmental Hazard Consultants



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