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Certifications Give Clear Signals Amid “Green Noise”

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A greeting card I recently received had a statement printed on the back, “Printed on paper made from responsibly managed forests.” People overwhelmed by the “green noise” of environmental claims may not pay attention to details, but this claim was particularly vague and made no reference to an authoritative source backing this claim.

On its informational website, paperbecause.com, Domtar, one of the major paper product manufacturers in North America, explains the value of third-party validation of environmental claims. Environmental claims about paper are far more meaningful, the web site notes, if they come in the form of a certification from The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), the Sustainable Forestry Initiative or the Canadian Standards Association. Of these, Domtar “favors” FSC “whenever possible” because “FSC certified forests are evaluated against 10 principles and 57 criteria for responsible forest management. Among other things, they ensure that waterways and wildlife habitat and species are protected” during and after logging.

Other paper products carry a specific claim, such as, “Printed on 30 percent recycled fiber.” An even more specific claim is better, such as “Printed on 30 percent post-consumer recycled fiber,” meaning the recycled paper used to make the card was not just mill scrap, which is rarely disposed anyway; the paper came from a recycling system collecting from consumers.

People who buy products on-line may have recently noticed a different type of certification on a product substituting for paper. Amazon padded plastic mailers are increasingly replacing cardboard boxes, and they carry a label with a recycling symbol and a reference to how2recycle.info. That web site explains the symbols and categories on the label. For the padded mailers, the label claims recyclability at the same sites accepting plastic bag drop off, but only after paper adhesive label is removed.

As noted on the how2recycle web site, “Variation in recycling programs, unclear labeling, and inaccurate recyclability claims make proper recycling a challenge.” However, people unwilling to investigate details may simply see the how2recycle recycling symbol on the packaging and wrongly assume it should be placed in a curbside recycling cart. In fact, mixing padded mailers with paper in curbside carts causes a problem. Marketing mixed recycled paper is hard enough in current commodity markets; plastic contamination makes it more difficult.

This potential for recycling confusion and contamination does not necessarily mean the padded mailers are bad for the environment. Amazon claims the switch from cardboard boxes to padded mailers has significantly reduced truck trips, as more orders can now fit into each delivery truck. As Shirley Lister, of Somis, noted about Amazon's previous packaging, "You could buy something as small as a lipstick and it comes in a box ten times too big,"

The presence of recycling arrows may also confuse consumers about other products. For example, most plastic is labeled with a number surrounded by a triangle made of chasing arrows. This resin identification code was introduced by the Society for the Plastics Industry more than 30 years ago, and the plastics industry generally supported mandates for labeling, according to triplepundit.com, because labeling could both facilitate sorting for future recycling programs and improve public perceptions about plastic in the meantime. However, not all plastic types are recyclable in most programs.

Use of some labels is regulated and meaningful. For example, use of the word "organic," whether for textiles or food, is governed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Program. Similarly, only the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency can designate energy saving appliances with an "Energy Star" label.

Additionally, some labels are owned by private organizations, so the threat of lawsuit keeps their labels meaningful. For example, the American Grassfed Association certifies meat from cows grazed on grass, a practice which produces less methane emissions than would be generated if those cows were fed corn on feed lots. The Flower Label Program guarantees minimum standards of environmental conditions for crops the organization's flower traders and producers say normally contain levels of pesticide residue higher than any food is legally allowed. This seems important for a product people stick their noses into and inhale, saying, "Oh, what a lovely smell."

More information:

<https://how2recycle.info/>

<http://www.paperbecause.com/knowledge-center/well-managed,-fsc-certified-forests-help-protect-p>

<https://www.ftc.gov/sites/default/files/attachments/press-releases/ftc-issues-revised-green-guides/greenguidessummary.pdf>