

Greenwashing

Exposed.

How to spot it. What to buy instead.

And what it costs you when you don't know the difference.

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A NOTE BEFORE WE START

Why I wrote this

I work inside the waste and sustainability industry. I'm a freelance sustainability manager for major film productions — and I've earned two Gold EMA Awards for doing this work properly on set. I know what genuine sustainability looks like. I also know what's just for show.

I wrote this guide because I kept seeing the same misleading claims repeated across products, brands, and industries — and I knew from the inside what they actually meant. Not as an academic exercise. As someone who has sat in the rooms where these decisions get made.

But there's something else I want to name before we get into the practical stuff. Being constantly misled — by products, by brands, by systems that should be trustworthy — has a cost that goes beyond your wallet. It erodes your confidence in your own judgment. It creates a kind of low-grade anxiety that's easy to dismiss but hard to shake. That's the mental and spiritual cost of greenwashing that nobody talks about.

This guide is about all of it. The practical and the personal. Because the two are never really separate.

No agenda. Just the honest version.

— Sara Griffin, True Cost Living

What greenwashing actually is — and why it works on all of us

Greenwashing isn't just a marketing problem. It's a trust problem.

Greenwashing is when a company spends more effort making their product sound sustainable than actually making it sustainable. It works because we want to make good choices — and brands engineer exactly that feeling, deliberately.

The result is a marketplace full of products with green leaves on the packaging, vague environmental promises, and very little actual change behind the scenes. And every time we're misled by one of those products, something small happens to us. We second-guess ourselves. We feel foolish. We trust our instincts a little less next time.

That cycle — mislead, doubt, repeat — is exactly what this guide is designed to interrupt.

The True Cost Principle

If a brand's marketing is louder than their transparency, that's your first signal. Genuinely sustainable companies show you the data. Greenwashers show you the aesthetic.

The mental cost

Decision fatigue is real. When we can't trust labels, every purchase becomes a small act of stress. Simplifying that — knowing what to look for — is an act of self-care as much as it is smart shopping.

The 7 red flags to look for on any label

Before you buy anything marketed as sustainable, run it through these seven checks.

■ **Red Flag 1: Vague claims with no data.**

"Eco-friendly." "Green." "Natural." No legal definition. No verification required. Any brand can use them on anything.

■ **Red Flag 2: Irrelevant claims.**

"CFC-free!" CFCs have been banned since 1987. Like advertising "cholesterol-free water." Technically true, completely meaningless.

■ **Red Flag 3: The lesser of two evils.**

"Made with 10% recycled content." The product is still harmful — the claim just makes you feel better about buying it.

■ **Red Flag 4: No proof.**

No third-party certification. No sustainability report. No data. Just a statement you have to take on faith.

■ **Red Flag 5: Hidden trade-offs.**

"Made from recycled materials" — but manufacturing uses toxic chemicals and the product can't be recycled. One good thing, many hidden bad things.

■ **Red Flag 6: Fake labels.**

Made-up certifications that look official but aren't — sometimes created by the brand itself.

■ **Red Flag 7: Aspirational language.**

"We're working toward sustainability." "Our goal is net zero by 2050." These are promises, not achievements.

The words that mean nothing

These appear on thousands of products every day. None have a legal definition in most markets.

| Term | What it actually means |
|------------------------------|--|
| Eco-friendly | No definition. No standard. No verification required. |
| Natural | Arsenic is natural. Crude oil is natural. Means nothing. |
| Green | A color. Not a certification. |
| Sustainable | Without a specific standard attached, this is marketing. |
| Clean | Popular in beauty. Completely unregulated. |
| Non-toxic | Not a regulated claim in most product categories. |
| Conscious | "Conscious collection." "Conscious choice." Purely aspirational. |
| Better for the planet | Better than what? By how much? Says who? |
| Responsibly sourced | Without a named third-party audit, this is self-reported. |
| Carbon neutral | Often achieved via low-quality offsets, not real reductions. |

What to look for instead

B Corp · Fair Trade Certified · GOTS · bluesign · OEKO-TEX Standard 100 · Rainforest Alliance.
These require independent auditing. They're not perfect — but they're verified.

Industries caught greenwashing — from someone who's been inside

These aren't conspiracy theories. These are documented cases from industries I watch closely.

// Fast Fashion

Major brands have launched "conscious" collections that independent analysis found contained the same synthetics, same manufacturing processes, and same chemical treatments as their standard lines — just with green packaging and a higher price.

// Recycling

The recycling symbol on plastic does not mean it will be recycled. Less than 9% of all plastic ever produced has been recycled. I've seen this from the inside. The symbol is marketing.

// Carbon Offsets

A 2023 investigation found over 90% of rainforest carbon offset credits from a leading certifier were phantom credits — not representing real reductions. Brands buy these, claim "carbon neutral," and continue emitting.

// Beauty & Personal Care

"Clean beauty" has no regulatory definition in the US. Products marketed as "non-toxic" can legally contain ingredients that independent toxicologists flag as harmful.

// Food Packaging

"Biodegradable" packaging often only breaks down under specific industrial composting conditions most people never have access to. In a standard landfill, it behaves like regular plastic.

The spiritual cost

Learning that systems you trusted were designed to mislead you is genuinely disorienting. It's okay to feel angry about it. What matters is what you do with that feeling — and this guide is one answer to that question.

What actually works

This is not about being perfect. It's about making decisions you can actually trust.

✓ **Look for third-party certifications.**

Not brand claims — verified standards. B Corp, Fair Trade, GOTS, OEKO-TEX. Named, audited, real.

✓ **Buy less, buy better.**

The most sustainable product is usually the one you don't buy. When you do, choose quality. One item lasting ten years beats five cheap ones lasting two.

✓ **Thrift and secondhand first.**

Lower environmental impact. No new resources. For clothing, secondhand items have been washed repeatedly — which breaks down surface chemical coatings like PFAS.

✓ **Ask for the data.**

Where is their sustainability report? Genuinely sustainable companies publish numbers, name suppliers, and measure emissions. If you can't find the data, that's data.

✓ **Trust your instincts.**

If something feels like marketing, it probably is. You've been right more often than you've given yourself credit for.

The mental health connection

Trusting your own judgment again — after years of being told the opposite by well-funded marketing departments — is one of the quieter benefits of learning to see through greenwashing. It builds back something real.

The True Cost checklist

Use this before any purchase you're not sure about. Screenshot it. Keep it close.

- Does the brand back their claims with data — or just words?

- Is there a named third-party certification?

- Can I find who made this and where?

- Does the sustainability claim apply to the whole product — or just one part?

- Would buying secondhand be an option here?

- What actually happens to this at end of life?

- Is the price premium going toward real change or better marketing?

- How do I feel about this purchase — and do I trust that feeling?

The bottom line

You don't have to be perfect. You just have to stop letting brands make your decisions for you. The math is on your side — once you know how to read it.

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No fluff. Just the math.