Greenwashing

Greenwashing is the practice of misleading consumers or stakeholders by falsely marketing products or company behavior as environmentally responsible. The term was coined by environmentalist Jay Westerveld in 1986, who criticized the hotel industry's towel reuse program as a cost-saving measure disguised as environmental concern.

RED FLAG	WHAT TO LOOK FOR
Lack of third-party certification	No credible endorsement from FSC, USDA Organic, or similar bodies
Broad or generic language	Terms like “eco” or “natural” used without explanation
Omission of negative impacts	Only positive metrics are disclosed while harmful impacts are hidden
No full lifecycle assessment	Environmental impacts of sourcing, use, and disposal are not disclosed
Inconsistencies with business model	A single green product is promoted within an otherwise unsustainable portfolio

Why It Matters

* Misguides consumer and investor decisions
* Distorts ESG scoring systems
* Introduces regulatory and reputational risk
* Undermines genuine sustainability efforts

Seven Sins of Greenwashing

1. Hidden Trade-off: Highlighting one green attribute while ignoring others
2. No Proof: Lacking substantiation
3. Vagueness: Using unclear or generic terms
4. Worshiping False Labels: Fake or misleading certifications
5. Irrelevance: True but meaningless claims
6. Lesser of Two Evils: Framing harmful products as eco-better
7. Fibbing: Outright false claims

Detecting Greenwashing

Use a critical lens:

* Ask for proof and third-party validation
* Look for full lifecycle disclosures
* Be wary of vague buzzwords
* Cross-check corporate behavior vs. marketing

Real-World Examples

* Volkswagen 'clean diesel' emissions scandal
* H&M Conscious Collection marketing scrutiny
* Chevron's 'We Agree' campaign lacking systemic reform