

# Environmental Lessons For Dummies

TRUDGING THROUGH ECO-JARGON AND FALSE ENVIRONMENTAL CLAIMS IS A JOB IN ITSELF. EDUCATION IS THE BEST WAY TO PREVENT BEING GUILTY OF (AND SUCCUMBING TO) GREENWASHING.

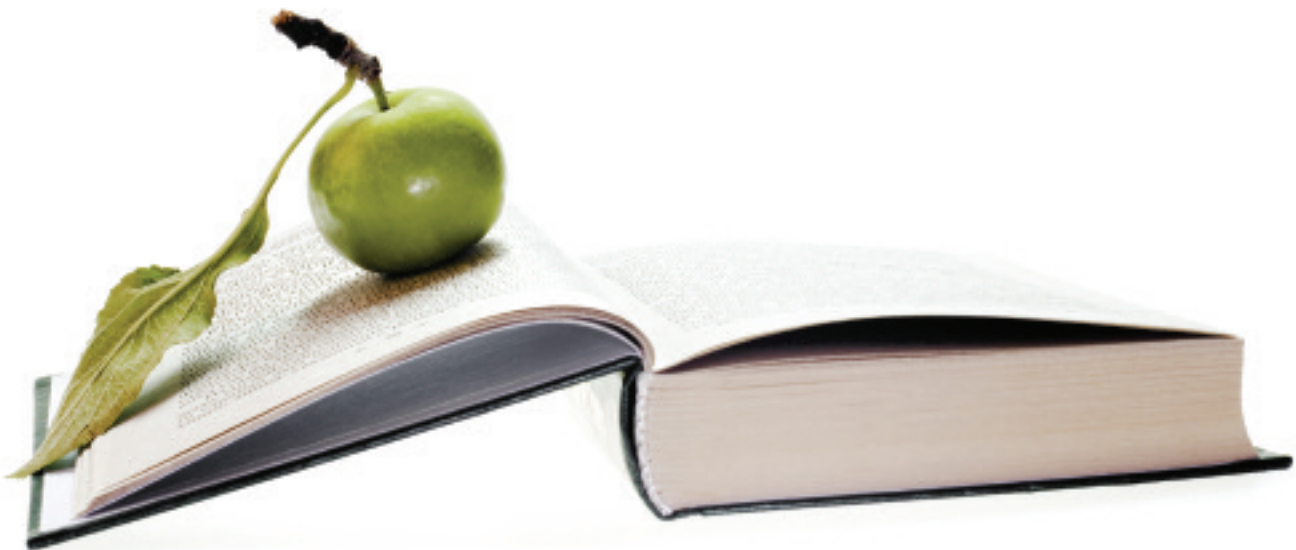
By Donald L. Brown, MAS

**SUPPLIERS THROUGHOUT THE INDUSTRY** are now using what some say is the ultimate eco-material. Called Utterlie, this remarkable substance claims to be the only safe, eco-friendly material in existence that can actually repair the ozone layer. Products made with Utterlie reportedly biodegrade in practically any environment, so they can guiltlessly be discarded in waterways, landfills or along roadsides without concern for the environment. The material breaks down into small fragments that feed the natural habitat. Even more remarkable is that during the degrading process the fragments actually release a proprietary gas that helps rebuild the ozone layer. Can you imagine feeding dolphins with your disposable mug or bag and repairing the ozone at the same time?

Another revolutionary eco-material is 100-percent recycled elephant dung, which is used to make treeless journals, notebooks and

various other paper products. "Brown is the new green," as they say. The material, called Pachyderm Paper or ElliePooh, is a renewable and sustainable resource as long as elephants aren't driven to extinction by ivory poachers. Foundations around the globe have been established to finance elephant orphanages and conservation centers by way of reclaiming their fibrous waste and creating environmentally friendly paper products. Not only does this product save forests, it also saves elephants!

Claims like these make headlines every day. Some are so outrageous that it has become a challenge to know the difference between what is really green and what is a pile of dung. Usually, if it sounds too good to be true it is. There is so much eco-jargon in use today that talking intelligently about the environment is a challenge for even the most literate distributor or supplier.



Eco-consciousness isn't just about reducing, reusing and recycling anymore. It has spawned a whole new vocabulary. Savvy marketers find that by adding "eco" to any word they can create trendy, green catchphrases and buzzwords that have yet to be defined by Merriam-Webster and that few customers will truly understand. Thus, confusion concerning which products are good for the environment and which are bad is common.

To make matters worse, some suppliers have jumped on the green bandwagon whether they are truly environmentalists or not, so their marketing claims may not be as forthright as they could be. Still others do it for positive PR. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) seeks to prevent deception and unfairness in the marketplace by bringing legal actions against false or misleading marketing claims, including environmental or green claims. In 1992 the FTC issued its Environmental Guide, which applies to all forms of marketing, advertising, labeling, promotional materials, logos, and internet marketing. Per the FTC guidelines:

- An environmental marketing claim should specify whether it refers to the product, the packaging, a component of the product or packaging or a combination of these.
- Environmental claims should not exaggerate or overstate attributes or benefits. This is considered greenwashing the facts to portray a more eco-friendly product.
- Claiming that a product is eco-friendly is deceptive unless the product attribute that the claim refers to is clearly stated and can be substantiated or proven.
- All environmental symbols or logos on products or marketing pieces have to be substantiated or proven.
- If only minor or incidental components of a product are non-recyclable, the product can still be labeled fully recyclable with no disclaimer.

## *Eco-consciousness isn't just about reducing, reusing and recycling anymore.*

Another problem is ignorance of ecological laws and regulations. For example, a disposable plastic bag ban originating in San Francisco has caused more than a dozen U.S. cities and four states to ponder similar bans. Countries such as Australia, South Africa, China, Bangladesh and Ireland already have country-wide bans or tax levies on disposable plastic shopping bags. To clarify, these banned bags belong to the super thin or high-density plastic variety used by retailers and supermarkets, which are typically less than one millimeter thick. Most legislation allows for thicker, stronger, reusable plastic bags that are easier and more profitable



## Have green product questions?

LET ME CONNECT YOU TO OUR COMPANY'S ECO-EXPERT.

**WITH TERMS SUCH AS "ECO-FRIENDLY"** encompassing a broad scope of interpretation, education has become a critical component of every sales process. Distributors are being asked to deliver eco-responsible programs, but the lack of clearly defined environmental benefits for products makes it challenging. Companies within the industry have found it imperative to educate themselves or face losing sales opportunities, so they've brought environmental experts into their organizations to respond to customer requests.

Becky Blair, MAS, from Waukesha, Wisconsin-based distributor Geiger, Inc. (UPIC: GEIGP008) is one of those experts. She researches eco-topics on the web, subscribes to environmental publications and reads everything she can about eco-products. She is so versed in the environment that she has been asked to conduct tradeshow training sessions on selling green. "There are currently no instructional programs one can take to obtain a general knowledge of the environmental movement except for traditional college courses. But most people don't have time to take a regular college semester course that is extremely specific and detailed," Blair says, adding that new information and product development is taking place every day, so the curriculum is a moving target.

"The best way to educate yourself is by reading eco-articles and publications or watching environmental programs provided by your local TV stations or environmental websites." Blair recommends *The Green Guide* published by *National Geographic*, which is a quarterly magazine available in print or online for \$15 a year. "Another way is to partner with distributors or suppliers that have a grasp on what green really means," she says.

Mary Ann Farmer, MAS, president of Cape Girardeau, Missouri-based supplier Magna-Tel, Inc. (UPIC: MAGNATEL) is using a team approach to fulfill the expert role. "Our research and development team stays up with all the environmental dialogue going on," Farmer says. "Each of us tries to gain what knowledge we can, and then we share that information with each other to decide how it impacts our business strategy. I wouldn't expect one person to keep up with all that's going on in the industry. The team concept resulted in us creating a new eco-magnet that we would not have otherwise thought of to satisfy customer requests."

Do you have an environmental expert in your organization? If not, you probably should. Having an expert in place gives customers a company contact that has knowledge of what eco-products are available and what various eco-terms really mean.

to recycle. California statute AB2449 allows plastic bags that are at least 2.25 millimeters thick. As such, the demand for alternative bag materials is on the rise, including materials that are reusable, recyclable, biodegradable or made from recycled material.

### What Makes A Product Green?

The best choices for greening any promotional product category are reusable items with extended life values or fully recyclable products that can be efficiently reinvented into new ones. In fact the U.S. government is challenging the nation to achieve a 40 percent recycling rate by 2011 as part of the EPA's Resource Conservation Challenge, which is a national effort to conserve natural resources and energy by managing materials more efficiently. The challenge also sends a message to suppliers suggesting they redesign products with longer lives or capacities for reuse.



## Eco-dictionary

A LIST OF ECO-FRIENDLY PRODUCT LABELS EVERY SUPPLIER AND DISTRIBUTOR SHOULD KNOW.

**Organic:** Produced without using fossil fuel-based fertilizer, synthetic pesticides or genetically modified plants.

**Sustainable/Renewable:** Made from sustainable or renewable materials that can be replenished easily (i.e., using plant fibers such as bamboo, hemp or cotton rather than wood or materials made from petroleum).

**Reusable:** Designed to be used repeatedly for an extended time period.

**Recycled:** Made from recycled materials that come from previously used consumer products (post-consumer waste); from scraps created during the manufacturing process otherwise earmarked for landfills (post-industrial waste); or other waste (elephant dung).

**Recyclable:** Produced using materials that can be reclaimed and reinvented into usable products.

**Compostable/Biodegradable:** Manufactured from materials able to decompose safely in the environment. Both natural, biodegradable materials such as paper or plastic made of polylactic acid (PLA) derived from corn starch and synthetics such as bio-plastics with added accelerators belong in this group.

With the world's supply of raw materials and natural resources depleting at an alarming rate, utilizing recycled materials rather than virgin ones makes great eco-sense, as long as they don't consume more energy or resources than they conserve. For this reason, Cape Girardeau, Missouri-based supplier Magna-Tel, Inc. (UPIC: MAGNATEL) created a new one-of-a-kind, eco-friendly magnet line utilizing 50-percent recycled, reground magnetic materials, which has never been done before.

The green value of recycling can greatly diminish depending on the facilities available in each geographic region and what they will actually process. Just because a product has a recycle logo and is fully recyclable doesn't mean it will get recycled. That is why reusing products, whenever possible, is even better than recycling.

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Other products are considered green not because they reuse old materials, but because they are positively changing the environment. For instance, electronics suppliers are reducing the amount of internal lead soldering normally used in making USB flash drives. The change, originating from efforts to reduce lead levels, has resulted in the creation of a more earth-friendly product overall. Standard products decorated with only environmentally friendly ink coatings can make the same claim. Even though the products don't necessarily fit into any of the normal green descriptions, they still promote a healthier environment.

### Breaking It Down

Out of all eco-friendly products, biodegradable ones may be the most misunderstood. Most consumers mistakenly believe that the term biodegradable means the product will disappear completely in a year or less, according to a 2006 consumer survey by the American Chemistry Council. Most also believe that the material won't harm the environment. Yet only products containing materials that "break down and decompose into elements found in nature within a reasonably short amount of time when exposed to air, moisture and bacteria or other organisms" can be marketed as biodegradable, according to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC).

Most biodegradable products purport to break down more quickly in landfills. While a seemingly logical claim, evidence shows this is not wholly possible. The FTC acknowledges that even products appropriately labeled may not break down easily if they are buried in a landfill or otherwise unexposed to sunlight, air and moisture—key agents of biodegradation. In direct contradiction,

PHOTO PROVIDED BY: AARRKRON RULE CORP. (UPIC: AARRKRON)



today's landfills are purposely engineered to eliminate moisture and to retard degradation. In fact, researchers have found legible 30-year-old newspapers, 10-year-old hot dogs and five-year-old lettuce still intact in landfills. They are more like time capsules than compost piles.

The most environmentally friendly way to dispose of biodegradable and compostable products is to compost them with other organic matter. The problem is that most curbside recycling programs do not offer composting, so items must be sent to specific industrial facilities. Unfortunately, few such refuse facilities exist in the United States, further minimizing their eco-friendly claims. To search for facilities in your area check out [www.findacomposter.com](http://www.findacomposter.com).

Recycling is not always a viable option, either. Biodegradable plastics, for instance, typically have a lower melting point than traditional plastics, which means that mixing even a small amount of biodegradable material into the traditional recycling stream can weaken the entire line, often prompting the recycling facility to remove them and place them with typical landfill waste. Recycling facilities set up to handle biodegradable material do exist but are not readily available to consumers. As a result, end users must research proper disposal methods for each varying brand and type of biodegradable material being offered. To learn more about biodegradable materials, check out The Biodegradable Products Institute at [www.bpiworld.org](http://www.bpiworld.org).

Additionally, most biodegradable plastics treated with accelerants will eventually degrade into small fragments of polymer, which persist in the environment for years until fully degraded. Until the products completely break down, they pose the same danger as non-biodegradable products and hence have the same short-term potential to harm wildlife and create litter problems. Accelerated chemical breakdown also speeds up the release of

methane gas, a core component of plastic and a known contributor to the greenhouse effects on our ozone layer. These plastics degrade best in hot, humid conditions where microbes flourish, meaning consumers must consider where they store their biodegradable products. Cool, dry areas are preferred. Most also have a shorter-than-usual shelf life, so predicting the life of an ongoing promotion could create challenges.

From a cultural perspective, the real elephant in the room is that the term biodegradable also connotes disposable, and thus the consumption of such products promotes a throw-away mentality among many members of society. Such a belief does not advance our planet's environmental needs to reclaim and reuse our natural resources. Until the number of compost facilities increases enough to support community curbside pickups, biodegradable products, for the most part, don't seem to be a truly ecological choice.



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Like religion and politics, everyone has opinions on what green means to them. Some have strong convictions while others seem not to care. "I believe Generation X embraces this lifestyle, whereas in my opinion a larger portion of the baby boomers are still planted deeply into consumerism," says Mary Ann Farmer, MAS, Magna-Tel, Inc. president. "When it comes down to it, most of the environmental problems we face are based on consuming too much stuff."

You can verify information about recycled elephant dung at [www.mrelliepooh.com](http://www.mrelliepooh.com). As for the other marketing claim, it was an utter lie.



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