



# Serious About Green

Emerging systems can help you navigate the murky green waters

While shopping for patio furniture a few years ago, I found a teak table affixed with a hang tag that claimed "FSC-certified." Familiar with the strict chain-of-custody requirement of the Forest Stewardship Council and the durability of teak, I purchased the table satisfied that I had met my own wants with a lighter footprint.

Many of you—and your clients—may have a similar reaction to a green label: pleased to fulfill an environmental responsibility while suiting personal needs. "My clients see 'earth friendly' or 'green' and they will buy a product despite greenwashing," said EcoBroker Tom Schwenk, of Seminars by Design.

Greenwashing is the practice of inflating a company's environmental practices or a product's environmental attributes. Greenwashed claims are typically vague, inflated or irrelevant, and tout ambiguous assertions such as environmentally friendly, green, essentially nontoxic, eco-safe, 100-percent natural or Earth smart.

So, am I a victim of greenwashing? Given this definition, no. The FSC is a highly regarded, scientifically based certification program, but, alas, the wood is just one component of the table. I don't know answers to more demanding questions such as where the table was made, what finishes were used and their impact on air quality and human health, or how it was transported to the retailer and how much global warming that created.

"There are many pieces to the puzzle of green purchasing," said Deborah Dunning, president of The Green Standard. "Unfortunately, one credible facet does not mean that the whole product is environmentally benign." The Green Standard espouses the use of scientifically based, third-party certifications, such as FSC, but, Dunning noted, "To be truly green, manufacturers and purchasers must look more holistically at products via life-cycle assessments and environmental product declarations."

As the green movement spills over from commercial to residential building and design, "green noise" will likely increase as manufacturers try to meet demand generated by new initiatives such as LEED for Homes<sup>1</sup> and the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) Builders Challenge<sup>2</sup>. These programs will stipulate green products, and design professionals will be expected to distinguish between greenwash and truly green. To succeed, you must understand the systems behind serious green purchasing.

## SERIOUS GREEN

As you become more resolute about specifying green, you will develop your own multifaceted method for evaluating products. However, the most prudent approach to green purchasing is to rely on scientifically based, third-party certifications.

## STOMPING OUT GREENWASH

During any product selection process, you should diligently research the options and ask questions such as:

- Does this product have an EPD? If not...
- Does this product have an LCA? If not...
- What material is this product made of?
- From where does the raw material come?
- How is the raw material extracted and processed?
- What is added to the product?
- How is it made?
- How is the material delivered?
- How is the product installed?
- How well will the product perform?
- How will it be maintained?
- How long will it last?
- At its end of life, can it be reused, recycled or upcycled?

Third-party certification, provided by such programs as FSC Certified, Green Seal, the SMaRT Sustainable Product Standard and Scientific Certification Systems, is granted by an independent organization with expertise to assess and verify a company's compliance with standards whose requirements are transparent. These protocols exist to help design professionals evaluate environmental characteristics of products, solving the ambiguities by leaving the guesswork to science. Moreover, they can help you meet the specific priorities of your clients by providing information on aspects such as indoor air quality or locally sourced materials.

Third-party certification is used as the basis for several emerging components in the global products information system: life-cycle assessment (LCA) and environmental product declaration (EPD).

## LCAS AND EPDS

According to the United Nations, 95 percent of a product's environmental impact is determined before purchase—in the harvesting of resources and the process of manufacturing, packaging and shipping. Thus, a product's life cycle must be carefully considered.

Life-cycle assessment is a biography of a product. A full product LCA is a scientifically robust measurement that gives the most complete information on a product's environmental impacts throughout

its life. It includes information on raw material sourcing, transportation, manufacturing, shipping, on-site construction/installation, use and maintenance, demolition and end of life. An LCA should be verified by a third party to ensure that it meets standards related to completeness, comparability and transparency. A full product LCA includes 12 impacts deemed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to be threatening to life on our planet: global warming, acid rain, water pollution, fossil fuel depletion, indoor air quality, habitat alteration, water use, ambient air pollution, ecological toxicity, human health, ozone depletion and smog.

Product LCAs and certification programs both provide a reliable basis for evaluating the environmental and sustainability performance of products. Moreover, using both offers the most scientifically robust approach to product specification and purchase. However, the most comprehensive, holistic tool available today is an environmental product declaration.

The key component in the emerging global product information system, EPDs integrate diverse product performance information into a single document and reference the certifications achieved by that manufacturer and brand product. They provide specifiers and purchasers with a range of product performance information, including all of the data in a third-party-certified LCA, as well as data pertinent to human health, mechanics and safety. Moreover, they may ultimately include information on life-cycle costs and other aspects of a product's performance over its life cycle.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In essence, a holistic, scientifically based evaluation of a product is the basis for serious green purchasing. Given the magnitude of a building's impact on the environment, the decisions by architects, interior designers and other building professionals can have a significantly positive environmental benefit. Competent professionals educated on the systems behind green purchasing are crucial in guiding decision-making on eco-safe product procurement. By empowering yourself with information that will help you avoid

greenwashing, you can help sustain and replenish the Earth. ■

—Ellen Hall is director of communications for The Green Standard, where she develops communication strategies for diverse audiences and stakeholders, including manufacturers and purchasers of interior building products.

### Notes:

1 LEED for Homes, a rating system released in January 2008, promotes the design and construction of high-performance green homes.

2 The U.S. Department of Energy Builders Challenge, a voluntary national energy savings program, calls for the U.S. homebuilding industry to build 220,000 high-performance, energy-efficient homes by 2012. (DOE aims to see 1.3 million homes of this high standard constructed by 2030).