

Interpreting Sustainable Marketing claims and the U.S. Furnishings Industry

Despite the simplified process of international trade in today's global business world, international marketing of sustainable organizations and products to the U.S. market has become something much less simple. As a consultant to American furnishings producers with globalized supply chains, I am often researching and investigating a variety of international environmental measures intended to minimize environmental toxicity, waste, and use of fossil fuels or precious natural resources, in order to preserve environmental integrity. Many fall under one of the eco-labels that are monitored by the umbrella organization called Global Ecolabelling Network. The GEN, as it is referred to, includes some of the older product certifications like the Nordic Swan label or the EU Flower label. It also includes Green Seal certification from the U.S. The Global Ecolabelling Network covers furniture products throughout much of the globe but it does not in the United States since there is not a category for furniture within Green Seal. The U.S. market has a divergence of specific product certifications that monitor various subcategories within the home furnishings industry. As the USGBC (United States Green Building Council) continues to define sustainable development through its LEED green building rating system, other eco-labels recognized worldwide struggle to gain recognition in the U.S. Marketing a Blue Angel certified product from Germany in the U.S. may achieve limited success based on its lack of relevance to the standards we have created on the other side of the pond regardless of its environmental attributes.

Sustainable Marketing to the U.S. for categories like home furnishings has to begin with transparency first. As one of the Co-chairs of the Standards Committee of the Sustainable Furniture Council, I have sought out more universal translation of environmental standards in use internationally. SFC's membership includes companies based in other regions of the globe that may very well deserve environmental recognition for standards in practice but without a level of transparency I am reluctant to accept their environmental claims. A more thorough revelation of internal and external practices reduces the chances for misinterpretations and greenwashing. Many designers have become increasingly aware of false environmental claims and dismiss a product immediately when confronted with terms like "totally environmentally friendly" or "all natural." I constantly counsel my clients on the need for honesty in marketing claims to eliminate any potential for aggrandizing sustainable achievements. Some companies outsource their marketing duties to organizations that have rudimentary knowledge of the company and even less of the eco-label attached to their products so when an environmental statement or a brochure dedicated to sustainable practices is drafted the potential for misinformation is almost guaranteed. As a consultant I insist of my clients that all marketing materials dedicated to sustainability pass through me before publication.

Many small companies are unjustly hampered by certifications based on costs. Many eco-labels can be out of range for small, start-up organizations due to their excessive price tags. The reality of financial constraints should never factor into environmental assessment but it does and always has. It makes it even more critical for a smaller producer to be transparent in their approach toward marketing sustainability. Additionally, international producers from regions

with a void in environmental regulations face the scrutiny of an intensified American public as reports of failed safety standards increase. These producers must be increasingly aware of documenting their products and supply chain and refrain from vague environmental claims.

In conclusion, the U.S. market has embraced sustainability as the road forward. It lacks a unified product certification like a Flower label and is susceptible to general confusion from one category to the next. Irrespective, international companies with sustainable products can succeed in the U.S. market and are doing so now. It requires greater disclosure and an understanding of the measuring tools. Successful organizations will be able to pass over the hurdle of a lack of unification of eco-labels and translate their environmental achievements into American consumer support. Sustainable marketing efforts will be rewarded based on that interpretation.



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