

GREEN CLAIMS

A "green claim" is information appearing on a product, its packaging, or in related literature or advertising material, which can be taken as saying something about its environmental aspects. It can take the form of text, symbols or graphics.

The international standard on environmental claims, ISO 14021, has been developed by standards bodies around the world to set out the standard of information that the public can expect to be given about the environmental impacts of consumer products. It is reinforced in the UK by the Green Claims Code.

Benefits for consumers include:

- (a) the expectation that the environmental information provided is accurate and helpful
- (b) the opportunity to question the meaning and relevance of claims they are not sure about, and to complain if appropriate.

By following best practice in this field and giving clear, straightforward information, a business can:

- (a) strengthen its reputation and credibility with consumers and with other business partners
- (b) demonstrate to regulators that it is trying to act responsibly, thus raising overall standards
- (c) meet requirements that may be introduced in some overseas markets.

Within the UK, Trading Standards Officers have powers under the Trade Descriptions Act to deal with claims that are demonstrably false or are found to be misleading. The Director General of Fair Trading can also take action against misleading claims under the Control of Misleading Advertisement Regulations 1998.

Claims made in advertisements are subject to the codes administered by the Advertising Standards Authority, the Independent Television Commission or the Radio Authority. These bodies will take appropriate account of the detailed guidance in ISO 14021 when investigating complaints about environmental claims.

The Green Claims Code is supported by the following organisations:

- Confederation of British Industry
- British Retail Consortium
- Local Authorities Coordinating Body on Food and Trading Standards
- British Standards Institution (responsible for administering ISO 14021).

Therefore, businesses wanting to give environmental information about their products should follow the code and use the detailed guidance in ISO 14021.

Use of the official EU eco-label is governed by specific regulations. More than 400 products across Europe currently have the label.

ATTRIBUTES OF GREEN CLAIMS

TRUTHFUL, ACCURATE, AND ABLE TO BE SUBSTANTIATED

There is no requirement to get an independent verifier to check a claim before it is made. But it is prudent to be sure, in advance, that the claim would be truthful and accurate, and that it could be substantiated. ISO 14021 recommends that the following steps be taken.

1. Check the claim is fair and truthful, by testing the product or otherwise.
2. Keep adequate records of these checks.
3. Be prepared to give the relevant information to anyone who asks for the claim to be substantiated. (If the information is too confidential to disclose, it is unwise to make a claim.)

CLEAR AND RELEVANT

The environmental issues connected with the product in question should be clear and relevant, eg "this paper comprises 75% post-consumer waste" is a fair claim, whereas it would be misleading to claim that it "contains no tropical hardwood", as this is not a material used in making paper.

PLAIN LANGUAGE

Green claims should be expressed in plain language and in line with standard definitions. ISO 14021 provides detailed guidance on the use of these terms which commonly appear in environmental claims:

- biodegradable
- compostable
- designed for disassembly
- extended life product
- recovered energy
- recyclable
- recycled content
- reduced energy consumption

- reduced resource use
- reduced water consumption
- reusable and refillable
- waste reduction.

SPECIFIC AND UNAMBIGUOUS

Claims should always avoid the vague use of terms such as "sustainable", "green", "non-polluting". Likewise, they should avoid linking vague descriptions, such as "friendly" or "kind", with words like "earth", "nature", "environment", "eco" and "ozone".

Green claims should not imply universal acceptance if there is doubt or division of scientific opinion over the issue in question.

Furthermore, green claims should not imply more than they actually cover, if the claim is only about limited aspects of a product or its production, or does not deal with a significant issue for that type of product. For example, it would be misleading to claim that a product is "made with a chlorine-free whitening process" if that process, while free from elemental chlorine, still involved the use of chlorine compounds.

MAKING COMPARISONS

Comparisons should be relevant, clear and specific, otherwise they should not be made. For example, it would be wrong to claim that a product is "now even better for the environment", or "uses less energy", without further qualification. But it could be fair to say that the product "uses 20% less electricity in normal use than our previous model".

Claims should not imply that a product or service is exceptional if the claim is based on what is standard practice anyway. Furthermore, they should not exaggerate the advantages of the environmental feature the claim refers to. For example, it is misleading to say "contains twice as much recycled content than before", if the original amount of recycled material was very small.

USE OF SYMBOLS AND ENDORSEMENTS

Green claims should be explicit about the meaning of symbols used — unless the symbol is required by law, or is backed up by regulations or standards, or is part of an independent certification scheme such as an eco-label. Symbols should not feature natural objects unless there is a direct link between the product, the object and the environmental benefit being claimed. This link should be clearly explained. Also there should be no implication that a product or service is endorsed or certified by another organisation when it has not been.