

*"We feel strongly that all LCA studies should meet ISO standards and be peer reviewed by independent experts."*



# Greenwash

The frustrating and dirty world of propaganda

Everybody's done it: selectively use information, put the best shine on a résumé, gloss over or omit stuff that might raise questions. It's the same with environmental claims and labeling, lifecycle analysis (LCA), and the latest buzzword, sustainability. Let me somewhat generally typecast the offenders as the "ignorant," the "academically sloppy," the "selective fact portrayers" and the "downright dirty." Readers would be well-advised to beware of such misinformation when attempting to formulate rational decisions. Here are some examples.

**The ignorant:** Toronto councilor Glenn De Baeremaeker was recently reported publicly as saying that paper grocery bags and telephone books were the result of "ripping down thousand-year-old trees in British Columbia to use once... and then throwing (them) in the garbage." Sorry councilor, but most paper grocery bags used in Canada come not from BC but from renewable US plantation forests that have been third-party certified as being sustainably managed. The minority that come from renewable Canadian managed forests (again certified) are made from wood chips, shavings and sawdust left over from harvesting trees for lumber (to make hospitals, universities and De Baeremaeker's house). As for telephone books, most are made from 100 per cent recycled paper materials (old newspapers and egg cartons). And while he's checking his facts, De Baeremaeker could maybe find time to investigate the latest residential recovery rates for Ontario: 72 per cent for paper overall and 88 per cent for telephone books.

**The academically sloppy:** These are the people who quote "lifecycle" studies without even reading the original works (one downfall of the Internet) or taking any notice of the carefully worded disclaimers of the authors of those studies (sometimes as broad as the exclusion clauses of an insurance policy). They don't dig behind who commissioned and funded the studies (sometimes obscured) and they quote studies that are up to 20 years old as if they were relevant today. They make assumptions that raw materials are supplied by the country of destination and that the energy grid of one country is roughly equivalent to that of another. For example, all kraft paper producing mills in Canada generate steam and electricity for their own paper production from wood and process wastes (chips, shavings, sawdust). They do not use 100 per cent purchased petroleum-based energy, as many European-based LCAs assume.

**The selective fact portrayers:** These seize on information that promotes their cause and neglect to mention other factors that, put together, perhaps would tell an entirely different story. For example, a recent study commissioned by a section of the European paper industry (performed and backed by exactly the same independent parties that participated in an earlier plastics-funded study) found that five environmental indicators were systematically favorable to paper carrier bags

and two indicators systematically favorable to plastic carrier bags. Does that justify saying that one is better than the other? No. The study also found that it's not enough to simply base comparisons on the ability to transport goods (carrying capacity). Protection, advertising support, strength, stiffness and print quality should also be taken into account in any comparative LCA.


A particular concern of the paper industry is that renewable resources and the carbon cycle be fairly incorporated into any comparisons between materials. This is why we have objected to parts of the Wal-Mart scorecard (which promotes renewable energy while barely recognizing renewable resources) and to the Packaging Association of Canada's proposed S-PAC model which doesn't recognize renewable resources at all. Better news on the horizon is the emergence of the COMPASS tool being developed by the US-based Sustainable Packaging Coalition.

It focuses on eight separate environmental indicators and treats each on its own merits rather than the S-PAC model that wants to condense all indicators into a single "sustainable packaging" number (so brand-owners can be charged for the right to put a logo or a statement on their packages).

**The downright dirty:** We would classify these as those who should know better but who deliberately smear a competitor or a competing packaging material through simplistic stereotyping and myth-making ("tree-hungry paper bags," etc.). We find this particularly offensive given the facts, but let's move on.



## Solutions

We're encouraged that the CSA and the federal Competitions Bureau are recommending the term "environmentally friendly" not be used as it's extremely misleading. We feel strongly that all LCA studies should meet ISO standards and be peer reviewed by independent experts, and that European lifecycle studies have little relevance to Canadian circumstances. In fact, a peer-reviewed LCA of the average US corrugated box is about to be released and a boxboard one is following it. Where possible, we hope to "Canadianize" this data at some point. Almost 90 per cent of Canada's managed forests are now third-party certified to one of three internationally recognized sustainable forest management standards. Check for yourself by reading Natural Resources Canada's annual report *The State of Canada's Forests* at <http://canadaforests.nrcan.gc.ca/rpt> 

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