

The *Greenwashing* Detector

10 Claims That Mean Nothing



1. "100% Natural" / "All Natural"

Why it's meaningless:

Arsenic, lead, and poison ivy are all natural. "Natural" has zero regulatory definition in most countries and tells you nothing about safety, sustainability, or ethics. Brands use it because it sounds good, not because it means anything.

What to look for instead:

- Specific third-party certifications (USDA Organic, GOTS, Ecocert, MADE SAFE®)
- Full ingredient transparency
- Independent safety testing results
- Clear sourcing information for all ingredients

Brands doing it right:

- Blueland's cleaning products all hold at least one safety certification including Cradle to Cradle, USDA Biopreferred, EPA Safer Choice, MADE SAFE® and/or EWG Verified.
- Passion Lilie's clothing is made exclusively from GOTS-certified organic cotton and AZO-free dyes.

2. "Eco-Friendly" / "Green"

Why it's meaningless:

These are marketing buzzwords with no legal definition. A product can be called "eco-friendly" while containing toxic chemicals, using fossil fuels, and exploiting workers. It's whatever the brand wants it to mean.

What to look for instead:

- Life cycle assessments (cradle-to-grave impact analysis)
- Specific environmental certifications (B Corp, Climate Label, Cradle to Cradle)
- Measurable impact metrics (water saved, emissions reduced)
- Transparency about trade-offs and ongoing challenges

Brands doing it right:

- Who Gives A Crap has performed a full Life Cycle Analysis of their products and they track Scope 1, 2 and 3 emissions.
- Avocado tracks their landfill waste diversion rate and has achieved a third party validated rate of 89%.



3. "Carbon Neutral"

Why it's meaningless:

Most "carbon neutral" claims rely on cheap carbon offsets that don't actually reduce emissions. Companies buy credits to "offset" pollution by paying for tree planting projects that may never materialize, or protecting forests that weren't actually threatened. It can be more of a case of accounting tricks, not real change.

What to look for instead:

- Science-Based Targets initiative (SBTi) commitments
- Transparency about Scope 1, 2, AND 3 emissions
- Actual emissions reduction targets and progress reports
- Investment in renewable energy and infrastructure changes (not just offsets)
- High-quality offset projects (if any) with permanent, additional, verified impact

Brands doing it right:

- Oway uses 100% renewable energy in their production processes.
- Blueland is certified by The Climate Label and discloses scopes 1, 2, and 3 emissions publicly along with reduction plans and time-based deadlines.

4. "Sustainable" (without specifics)

Why it's meaningless:

"Sustainable" is so overused it's lost all meaning. Sustainable for what? The environment? Workers? Local communities? Forever? Five years? Without specifics, it's just a feel-good word that means whatever the brand wants you to think it means.

What to look for instead:

- Specific sustainability goals with timelines and metrics
- Regular progress reports with actual data
- Third-party verified impact assessments and certifications
- Clear articulation of what they mean by "sustainable"
- Acknowledgment of what they're NOT yet doing well

Brands doing it right:

- Plaine Products is a Certified B Corp and publishes annual sustainability reports.
- Avocado publishes annual Impact Reports that disclose specific metrics, including Scope 1, 2, and 3 carbon emissions and sustainability goals.



5. "Recyclable"

Why it's meaningless:

Technically, almost everything is recyclable - the question is whether it actually GETS recycled. Only 9% of plastic waste has ever been recycled globally. That "recyclable" symbol on plastic packaging usually means it will end up in a landfill or incinerator because your local facility doesn't accept it, it's contaminated, or there's no market for the material.

What to look for instead:

- Take-back programs where the brand actually recycles their own products
- Materials widely accepted in curbside recycling (aluminum, glass, paper/cardboard)
- Design for circularity (mono-materials, easy disassembly, initiatives to ensure nothing goes to landfill at end of life)
- Plastic resin codes 1 and 2 only (if plastic must be used)

Brands doing it right:

- The Very Good Bra makes 100% compostable underwear and their founder helped develop Australia's first textile composting standard.
- Plaine Products' personal care range is infinitely circular, coming in aluminum containers that can be refilled directly by the brand.

6. "Made with Recycled Materials"

Why it's meaningless:

Could be 1% recycled content. Could be 99%. "Made with" tells you nothing about how much. It's like saying a cookie is "made with chocolate" when there are three chips in the whole batch. Some brands use this phrase specifically because they don't have to disclose the percentage.

What to look for instead:

- Specific percentages: "Made with 80% post-consumer recycled polyester"
- Post-consumer vs. pre-consumer recycled content (post-consumer is better)
- Third-party certifications (Global Recycled Standard, Recycled Claim Standard)
- Transparency about exactly which components use recycled materials
- Percentage goals and progress over time

Brands doing it right:

- Ocean Bottle makes water bottles from 65% recycled materials, including 90% recycled stainless steel that is GRS certified.
- Hook & Loom makes 100% recycled rugs from post-consumer recycled garments.



7. "Vegan"

Why it's meaningless:

Vegan means no animal products - which is great for animal welfare - but tells you nothing about environmental or social impact. Vegan leather can be plastic made from fossil fuels, for example. Vegan food can still use pesticides, exploit workers, and destroy ecosystems. Vegan ≠ sustainable.

What to look for instead:

- Material composition (plant-based? which plants? how grown?)
- Supply chain transparency
- Combined certifications (Vegan + Organic, Vegan + Fair Trade, Vegan + B Corp)
- Information about agricultural practices, worker conditions, and end-of-life

Brands doing it right:

- Eucalypso makes 100% vegan products from TENCEL™ Lyocell. Their products also carry multiple third-party certifications.
- River Organics' cosmetics are certified by The Vegan Society and made with 75% certified organic ingredients.

8. "Chemical-Free"

Why it's meaningless:

Everything is chemicals. Water is a chemical (H₂O). You are chemicals. This phrase is scientifically nonsensical and preys on chemophobia. What brands usually mean is "no synthetic chemicals" - but plenty of synthetic chemicals are safe, and plenty of natural chemicals are toxic.

What to look for instead:

- Specific avoidance of known harmful substances (using recognized hazard lists)
- Third-party safety certifications (EWG Verified, MADE SAFE®, OEKO-TEX)
- Transparency about ALL ingredients, not just the "good" ones
- Science-based safety data
- Clear explanation of why specific ingredients are chosen or avoided

Brands doing it right:

- Activist Skincare combines natural botanical ingredients - some certified organic - with safe, carefully chosen synthetics and each product includes a full ingredient list.
- Avocado holds multiple non-toxicity certifications, including OEKO-TEX®, MADE SAFE®, GREENGUARD Gold, EWG Verified®, and Formaldehyde-Free Claim Verified.



9. "Plant-Based"

Why it's meaningless:

Which plants? How were they grown? Monoculture corn grown with pesticides and fossil fuel-based fertilizers is plant-based. Coca-Cola is plant-based. This term tells you nothing about environmental impact, just the origin of raw materials.

What to look for instead:

- Specific crops identified (not just "plant-based")
- Organic or regenerative agriculture certifications
- Information about water use, land use, and biodiversity impact
- Supply chain transparency (where grown, by whom, under what conditions)
- Comparison to alternatives (is this plant-based option actually better?)

Brands doing it right:

- Oway's formulas are derived from 90-95% botanical ingredients, some reaching 100%. The majority of these are grown on the brand's own biodynamic farm.
- Delicate Daisys uses ingredients derived from plants that are clearly labeled, some of which are organic and/or from regenerative farms.

10. "Ethically Made" / "Ethically Sourced"

Why it's meaningless:

Ethical by whose standards? The brand's? A third party's? Yours? Without specific certifications or transparent auditing, this is just a brand saying "trust us, we're good people." It tells you nothing about actual labor conditions, wages, or workplace safety.

What to look for instead:

- Fair Trade certification or equivalent
- SA8000 (social accountability standard) certification
- Transparency about factory locations and working conditions
- Living wage commitments (not just minimum wage)
- Independent third-party audits (not just brand self-reporting)
- Worker voice and collective bargaining rights

Brands doing it right:

- Passion Lilie's suppliers are carefully vetted using Fair Trade Federation's screening process before becoming a production partner.
- Toki Mats discloses Tier 1 suppliers which are audited by third parties including BSCI and SEDEX.



Want to know which brands are doing the work?

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