

June 25, 2007

## **Can They Really Call the Chainsaw Eco-Friendly?**

By CLIFFORD KRAUSS

ATLANTA -- Home Depot sent a note a few months ago to the companies that supply the 176,000 products it sells, inviting them to make a pitch to have their products included in its new Eco Options marketing campaign.

More than 60,000 products -- far more than obvious candidates like organic gardening products and high-efficiency lightbulbs -- suddenly developed environmental star power.

Plastic-handled paint brushes were touted as nature-friendly because they were not made of wood. Wood-handled paint brushes were promoted as better for the planet because they were not made of plastic.

An electric chainsaw? Green, because it was not gas-powered. A bug zapper? Ditto, because it was not a poisonous spray. Manufacturers of paint thinners, electrical screwdrivers and interior overhead lights claimed similar bragging rights simply because their plastic or cardboard packaging was recyclable.

"In somebody's mind, the products they were selling us were environmentally friendly," said Ron Jarvis, a Home Depot senior vice president who oversees the Eco Options program.

But not in his mind.

"Most of what you see today in the green movement is voodoo marketing," he added. "If they say their product makes the sky bluer and the grass greener, that's just not good enough."

By the standards of Mr. Jarvis -- who fertilizes his own home garden with a liquefied worm waste product packaged in recycled soda bottles and fills his swimming pool with salt water to avoid putting chlorine into the environment -- only 2,500 of the products made the cut.

Even at that number, some environmentalists say that Home Depot is being too inclusive. In the process, they say, it is engaging in its own kind of overstated marketing, posing as green even as it continues to sell powerful pesticides and polluting lawnmowers.

Green, after all, has become the new "new and improved," a label so widely used that many environmental groups, while lauding the heightened interest of consumers, now dismiss many of the efforts as greenwash.

"Everybody is in a mad scramble to say how green they are," said Jim O'Donnell, manager of the Sierra Club Stock Fund, which handles \$50 million in a portfolio of companies it considers environmentally friendly. He added that he was hopeful the product greening would become more meaningful over time.

One reason for the scramble is that there are few verifiable or certified standards to substantiate claims. Crest has introduced a toothpaste containing green tea extract and natural mint, sold under the "Nature's Expressions" label, even though it contains artificial ingredients like most toothpastes. Raid sells a wasp and hornet killer in a green can marked "Green Options" with "Natural Clove Scent."

"You almost have to be a scientist with a lab to decipher the dizzying array of claims," said Robyn Griggs Lawrence, editor in chief for Natural Home magazine. "It's hard to get information on what makes a product green."

Few people know that better than Mr. Jarvis of Home Depot, the nation's second-largest retailer behind Wal-Mart.

The products he has accepted for the Eco Options promotion include solar-powered landscape lighting, biodegradable peat pots and paints that discharge fewer pollutants.

But he has often gone back to suppliers and independent testers for clarification and new testing on products. Sometimes he requests product improvements, since Home Depot ultimately wants to sell about 6,000 products under the Eco Options program. (The suppliers have an incentive to meet his requests: sales of products in the Eco Options program have gone up an average of about 10 percent since the program began in April.)

Home Depot executives acknowledge that they are navigating largely uncharted waters because the government and private-company certifications that do exist on environmental impact tend to be narrowly focused.

It took weeks, for instance, to choose among a multitude of paint toxicity standards that local governments have set around the country. (Home Depot said it chose the strictest standard, set in Southern California.)

For now, most Eco Options products rely on independent certifications like Energy Star, which measure energy efficiency and is run by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Energy.

Even though Energy Star is a widely accepted barometer for how much electricity a refrigerator or washing machine uses, it does not measure other factors, like how much energy was used to make the appliance in the first place or whether the manufacturer used recycled materials and encouraged its product to be recycled at the end of its life.

Home Depot is working with Scientific Certification Systems, a private company based in Emeryville, Calif., that audits and certifies company claims, to develop new broad-based standards. They will grade a product based on its environmental record over its entire life cycle -- including the sustainability of its production process, its efficiency and longevity and how it can be recycled when it is no longer useful.

But until some kind of standard can be worked out, Mr. Jarvis and his team are forced to work their way through the thicket of claims.

They are currently considering a rug that is made out of corn fiber instead of nylon, one that the manufacturer is heralding as a natural, earth-friendly product. Corn is natural, Mr. Jarvis acknowledged, but he said he was concerned about the buildup of phosphates in the Gulf of Mexico coming off the Mississippi River from corn farming, as well as the fuel it takes to run the tractors in corn fields and to transport the corn.

"When you look at the entire life cycle, nylon could have less of an environmental impact," he said.

Teimeiko Fletcher, an environmental marketing manager at Home Depot, walked into Mr. Jarvis's office on a recent day with a thick folder of products that manufacturers wanted to be included in the Eco Options program.

Mr. Jarvis liked a dimmer made by Lutron that promised 5 percent energy savings, but asked that the Environmental Protection Agency be consulted for verification. He was impressed by a claim by E-3 that a spark plug for lawn and garden products would lower carbon dioxide emissions by 7 percent, but he asked Ms. Fletcher to find out if other spark plugs on the market could do better.

One manufacturer said its asphalt roofing was environmentally friendly because it could be placed over existing roofing, thereby limiting overloading of landfills.

Mr. Jarvis said he was not impressed, even though Home Depot already sells the product. "Wood shingles would be better, as long as it comes from sustainable forestry," he noted.

Skeptics say Home Depot is also attempting to give itself a green patina, endorsing products that may not be all they are cracked up to be while continuing to sell lawnmowers, toxic pesticides and inefficient light bulbs.

Urvashi Rangan, a senior environmental health scientist at Consumer Reports, complained of one store where Eco Options signs were placed haphazardly around toxic bee and hornet insecticides.

"If they really wanted to promote sustainability, they would discontinue their products with the least green attributes," said Garvin Jabusch, a partner at Green Alfa Advisors, which directs investors on how to invest in a sustainable economy. "Manufacturers would stop making them on the spot."

Mr. Jarvis says many manufacturers have expressed a willingness to work with Home Depot to improve their products to earn the Eco Options label. "The manufacturers are seeing the green ship leave the port," he said "and they don't want to be left on the dock."