

ENVIRONMENTAL LABELLING THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CERTIFICATION RELATED TO SEVERAL ENVIRONMENTAL APPEALS PRESENT IN THE BRAZILIAN MARKET

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As environmental policies advance on the world stage, the growth of environmental appeals on product and service labels has been following this same trend. In 2014, the Market Analysis Institute released a study, conducted between 2010 and 2014, which found a 327% increase in environmental appeals on product labels (TERRACHOICE, 2014).

This increase in environmental labels or statements on product packaging can be explained by a change in consumer mentality. In the past, the main criterion for the acquisition of a product was, besides its quality, the price, not being concerned with the eventual impacts that such products could bring to the environment. However, it was found that consumers are increasingly willing to pay more for sustainable products. According to a survey conducted by Nielsen, about 66% were willing to pay more for products and services that come from companies that are committed to a positive social and environmental impact. This result shows a growth trend when compared to previous years, being 55% in 2014 and 50% in 2013 (NIELSEN, 2015).

In the midst of this reality, it was noted that many environmental labels or statements have not been made correctly, causing inaccurate and unverifiable information for the final consumer who, in turn, is unable to obtain reliable information to assist in their product purchasing process.

In order to provide clearer and more precise information about their products, organizations can pass these types of information through self-declarations or through certifications, following the principles foreseen in the environmental labelling norms NBR ISO 14020 (ABNT, 2002), NBR ISO 14021 (ABNT, 2013), NBR ISO 14024 (ABNT, 2004) and NBR ISO 14025 (ABNT, 2015).

ENVIRONMENTAL LABELLING

The ABNT NBR ISO 14020 standard defines the label or environmental statement as a statement that indicates the environmental aspects of a product or service, through accurate and verifiable information, and may appear in the form of text, symbol or graphic element.

From this standard, the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) established three types of standards for environmental labelling.

Type 1 environmental labelling

Type I environmental labelling is a voluntary third-party program based on multiple criteria taking into account the life cycle of the product.

The principles and procedures for the development of type I environmental labelling programs are defined in the ABNT NBR ISO 14024 standard.

Type 2 environmental labelling

Environmental labelling type II is a self-declared environmental program, in which an environmental declaration is made by the manufacturer or any interested party, without the need for an independent third-party certification.

The principles and procedures for the development of type II environmental labelling programs are defined in the ABNT NBR ISO 14021 standard.

Type 3 environmental labelling

Environmental labelling type III is a voluntary third-party program based on predetermined parameters based on life cycle assessment (LCA) data.

The principles and procedures for the development of type III environmental labelling programs are defined in the ABNT NBR ISO 14025 standard.

THE SEVEN SINS OF ENVIRONMENTAL LABELLING AND GREENWASHING

Although technical standards define the environmental labelling guidelines, it is very common to find products that deviate from these principles by providing inaccurate, unverifiable and sometimes false information to the final consumer.

This phenomenon is known as greenwashing. To identify greenwashing, it is necessary to evaluate if the product label presents at least one of the seven sins of environmental labelling (TERRACHOICE, 2010).

The seven sins of environmental labelling are described below:

1. Sin of lack of proof;
2. Sin of uncertainty;
3. Sin of the camouflaged environmental cost;
4. Sin of cult to false labels;
5. Sin of irrelevance;
6. Sin of the least worse;
7. Sin of the lie.

1. Sin of lack of proof

It occurs when the organization declares that its product is environmentally friendly, but does not present any evidence or certification from a third party that proves such requirement.

A good example is the personal hygiene products that declare that they do not perform tests on animals, but there is no evidence or certification.

2. Sin of uncertainty

It occurs when the organization uses any kind of broad and vague statement that will not be understood by the consumer.

A good example is the products that are said to be natural and induce the consumer to think that the product is environmentally friendly. As it is known, there are many natural substances that are harmful both to health and to the environment, such as heavy metals (mercury, lead, etc.).

3. Sin of the camouflaged environmental cost

It occurs when organizations suggest that their products are green based only on an environmental criterion and forgetting environmental aspects that may be even more relevant.

This kind of sin occurs very often in the cleaning products market when many say they are biodegradable, but do not consider aspects very important to their production such as water and energy consumption, for example.

4. Sin of the cult to false labels

It occurs when organizations make use of labels that refer to the idea of third-party environmental certifications, when in fact they are just labels created by the organization itself and that do not represent the reality of the company performance.

A good example of this practice are the labels with the design of a tree with the words “plant a tree”. This kind of label is found on some products and does not represent an attitude of great part of the companies that use these labels.

5. Sin of the irrelevance

This sin occurs when an environmental statement, even true and environmentally correct of the product, actually concerns the obligations of manufacturers.

The main example is the aerosol packaging, which had the following sentence: “product free of chlorofluorocarbon (CFC)”. It is known that CFC was banned from packaging by legislation decades ago. Therefore, the manufacturer is only fulfilling a legal duty.

6. Sin of the least worse

This sin occurs within product categories that have a great impact on the environment and people’s health. Although these products refer to true statements, this kind of statement can distract consumers about the possible harm of the products.

A good example is the pesticides that claim to be environmentally friendly.

7. Sin of lie

It occurs when an organization makes statements about false third-party certifications or improperly uses certifications whose registration is out of date.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CERTIFICATION FOR THE CONSUMERS

The proportion of environmental appeals that present at least one of the sins of environmental labelling has been decreasing over the years. In 2010, nine out of ten calls in the category of cleaning and personal hygiene products incurred

some of the sins, while, in 2014, this proportion decreased to about six out of ten products (TERRACHOICE, 2014).

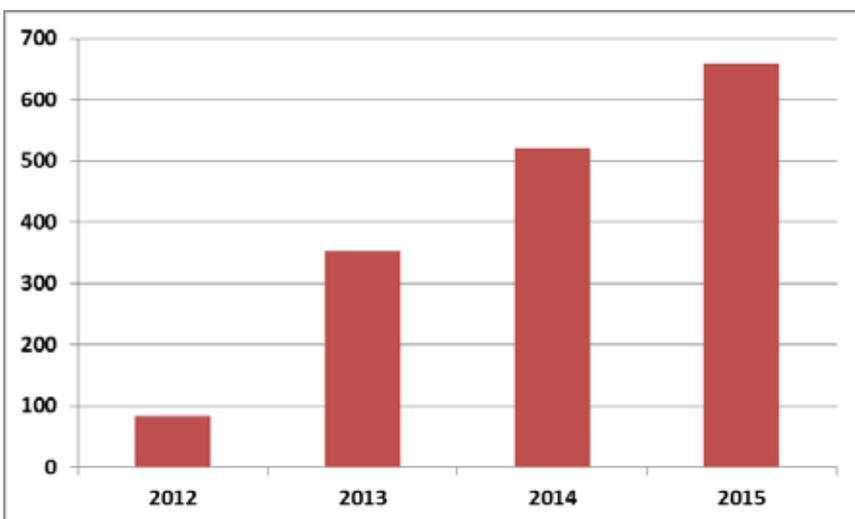
The certification is a process conducted by an independent and impartial third-party entity that assesses whether certain products or services comply with certain technical standards. This assessment is based on audits, sampling and periodic laboratory testing (ABNT, 2017).

When searching for a certification, the organization should look for competent certification bodies, recognized and accredited by Instituto Nacional de Metrologia, Qualidade e Tecnologia (Inmetro). When accrediting a certification body, Inmetro recognizes the entity competence to evaluate an object, based on pre-established rules, most of the time by Inmetro itself (INMETRO, 2017).

As opposed to a self-declaration, which can be issued by the manufacturer itself interested in declaring beneficial information of its products, the certification guarantees to the consumer that a certain product or service is continuously meeting the technical standards and has been evaluated impartially.

Facing this reality, both organizations and consumers started to notice the added value when searching for certifications. As an example of the search for environmental certifications, the number of certificates issued in Brazil for ABNT ISO 14001:2004 certification until 2015 was extracted from the Inmetro website (Figure 1), since in 2015 there was the publication of the new review of the rule.

Figure 1 – Certificates issued in Brazil for ABNT ISO 14001:2004 between 2012 and 2015



Source: Inmetro (2017).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

With the information gathered, it can be noticed that the consumers behavior and organizations towards environmental certifications has changed over the years.

It was verified that the acquisition process of the products has not been more defined by the price, as far as 66% of the interviewed were willing to pay more for sustainable products. This is because when considering the cost of a product, it is necessary to remember that social and environmental aspects are also part of the composition of costs, being, however, aspects of difficult valuation.

It is important to emphasize that the greater demand for sustainable products by consumers influences the market by stimulating greater supply of products with these characteristics.

At the same time, it was found that environmental information in more than half of the products sampled is not easily verifiable, accurate or true, characterizing the greenwashing.

This way, the search for certified products and services has been increasing over the years, as these are verified by an independent and impartial third-party entity, which has competence.

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