

Making Sense of Multi-Attribute “Green” Certifications

By Ellen Sinreich, Green Edge, LLC and William Herrmann, Brown University

From the perspectives of the consumer and the producer, the various **eco-labels** found on products, food and buildings have created a great number of issues for the environmentally conscious.

For the consumer, it is difficult to distinguish between labels that seemingly convey the same message. For the company seeking to certify its products, it is difficult to determine which label is most worthwhile for a particular product. These concerns are most relevant with regard to **multi-attribute certifications** that cover a large variety of products.

Unlike specific, single-attribute labels that only target a specific aspect of a product, such as recycled content or biodegradability, broader eco-labels such as Green Seal or EcoLogo are much more difficult to understand for all involved primarily because of their larger scope. As a figurative ‘seal of approval’—or in the case of the Good Housekeeping Green Seal of Approval, a literal one—these eco-labels attempt to assuage all of the consumer’s concerns with one succinct label. This type of certification presents the greatest potential for confusion in the market, as consumers and businesses are simply asked to trust the certifying body that a certain product is environmentally friendly with regard to all aspects of that product.

In addition to common concerns about the level of rigor in testing and auditing a product, there is also a need



With high profile organizations including the United States Postal Service pursuing environmental certification, eco-label awareness is on the rise. The USPS earned the Cradle to Cradle certification for priority mail packaging.

to assure that the standards and criteria against which these products are tested have been developed by organizations with the ability, as evidenced by their credentials, to make such difficult distinctions. Given the complexities of determining what makes a product environmentally friendly, a certifying body must have an overriding philosophy that makes sense along with a demanding certification process.

Certifications to Consider

The six most prominent broad-reaching, multi-attribute eco-labels that GreenEdge has identified are Green Seal, EcoLogo, Cradle to Cradle, SMaRT, Design for the Environment, and Good Housekeeping Green Seal of Approval. We will briefly introduce these six labels and then differentiate and comparatively evaluate them based on criteria developed as a result of our research.

Green Seal

Green Seal¹, a non-profit organization, awards its certification to a very large variety of products, from household cleaning products to compact fluorescent lamps to windows. They have developed 37 different quantitative and technical standards to judge this large variety of products. These standards are reviewed every three years to ensure that only the top-performing products in each category may earn certification. Green Seal works on a pass-fail basis; a product is either certified by Green Seal or denied.

EcoLogo

Originally established by the Canadian government as the Environmental Choice program, EcoLogo² is now run by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing, a for-profit environmental marketing firm. Over 120 different product categories have been outlined, each with its own specific standards. Though the criteria for certification vary across industries, EcoLogo vows that products carrying the label “represent environmental leadership and provide tangible human health and environmental benefits”. The EcoLogo certification was designed with the intention that it would only be awarded to the highest performing 20% of products in each category. Like Green Seal, EcoLogo is only earned on a pass-fail basis.

Cradle to Cradle

The Cradle to Cradle certification³ was created by architect William McDonough and chemist Michael Braungart’s consulting firm, McDonough Braungart Design Chemistry, but is now officially administered by the non-profit Green Products Innovation Institute. Envisioning closed-loop industries that eliminate the very idea of waste, McDonough and Braungart’s certification judges products based on their material health, material reuti-

lization, renewable energy use, water stewardship, and social responsibility and awards deserving products with a basic, silver, gold, or platinum certification. Cradle to Cradle’s criteria are the same for all products, regardless of industry.

SMaRT

The SMaRT certification⁴, short for Sustainable Materials Rating Technology, was developed by the ten-year-old Institute for Market Transformation to Sustainability (MTS), a non-profit organization originally founded by the former chairman of Herman Miller furniture. Following an expansion in 2006, this certification, which also has four levels, is now intended for all products across industries, and excludes only planes and vehicles. SMaRT was developed through a consensus-based process that incorporates other respected standards, such as various EPA standards, Forest Stewardship Council standards, and GREENGUARD, into one comprehensive certification. The philosophy on which SMaRT’s criteria are based is similar to Cradle to Cradle’s, and its criteria are the same across product categories.

Good Housekeeping Green Seal of Approval

Touted as a certification that will help consumers “sift through the confusing clutter of ‘green’ claims” on products, the Good Housekeeping Green Seal of Approval⁵ covers cleaning and beauty products, paints, and coatings at the present time, with more product categories in development. In order to receive the Green Seal of Approval, a product must first achieve the original Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, signifying that a product performs as advertised. The Green Seal of Approval then evaluates the product based on its water use, energy efficiency, ingredient and product safety, packaging reduction, and corporate social responsibility.

Design for the Environment

Unlike the five other certifications discussed, Design for the Environment⁶ is a government-affiliated environmental certification, developed and administered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The certification, which assesses chemical safety with regard to the environment and personal health as well as product performance, is intended for a large variety of products, from paints, to films, to cleaning products.

Green Certifications at a Glance

	Costs	Benefits	Bottom Line
	<p>Fees: \$17,500 to \$20,000</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost of gathering documentation likely greater than for other certifications because of rigorous certification process • Certification process can take from one to four months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Backed by respected companies who are leaders in sustainability • Buildings are eligible for LEED "Innovation in Design" credits when using SMaRT certified products • A cutting-edge certification with only 30 or so products certified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively expensive and not yet well known • Makes sense if sustainability is a centerpiece of business strategy and/or if potential purchasers are highly knowledgeable about sustainability
	<p>Fees: \$5,500 to \$75,000</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Certification process can take from two to six months • Site visit and exhaustive documentation required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well recognized brand with strong, credible sustainability implications • Buildings are eligible for LEED "Innovation in Design" credits when using Cradle to Cradle certified products • A cutting-edge certification with 300 or so products certified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As with SMaRT, must be very committed to sustainability, as the label can be very expensive and process can be very long • Despite the label's past transparency issues, Cradle to Cradle is widely seen as the most comprehensive, rigorous certification—though SMaRT may steal this title in the future
	<p>Fees: \$2,000 to \$10,000</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fees vary based on number of products or services, applicant's annual revenue, and other factors • Certification process takes about three months • Data and testing requirements are substantial • Must renew every year 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevalent certification with approximately 3400 certified products • Cited in LEED standards, can be the basis for LEED credits • Highly respected, particularly in the cleaning products industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As one of the better known certifications, Green Seal's fees are a bargain, and few people would seriously question its credibility either • An excellent choice for a company which is serious about sustainability and looking for an immediate boost
	<p>Fees: \$1,750 to \$7000</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional fees include 0.5% of sales, minimum \$2,000 • Process is fairly short, around 35 to 70 days • On-site audit sometimes required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extremely prevalent, almost 8000 products have been certified • EcoLogo cited in LEED standards, can be the basis for LEED credits • Modest certification fees and well known. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A well respected certification with minimal certification fees and a streamlined process • Comparable with Green Seal in most cases • Green Seal has a slight edge in prestige but EcoLogo has more of an international presence
	<p>Fees: \$10,000</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional fees include cost of ad space in Good Housekeeping • Requires specific ingredient and manufacturing data, as well as product submission • Requires achieving Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval first • Certification process can take multiple months 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only nine products have earned certification • Associated with Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, a one-hundred-year-old label that is extremely well known and culturally significant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainability aspect of this certification appears secondary to original Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval • If sustainability is a significant aspect of marketing strategy and/or business philosophy, look elsewhere for more respected and established certification
	<p>Fees: Highly Variable</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fees dependant mostly on lab testing fees • Ingredient information and product performance reports must be submitted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While government certifications tend to become most recognizable, DfE has yet to become as well known as Energy Star or USDA Organic • There are a large number of certified products at 1700 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DfE has yet to command significant respect in the market, and right now, given the overlap in products that they cover, there is little reason to choose DfE over other labels, particularly Green Seal

If you focus on the goal and not the process, you inevitably compromise.

— YVON CHOUINARD, FOUNDER OF PATAGONIA

Choosing the Best Green Certification for Your Products

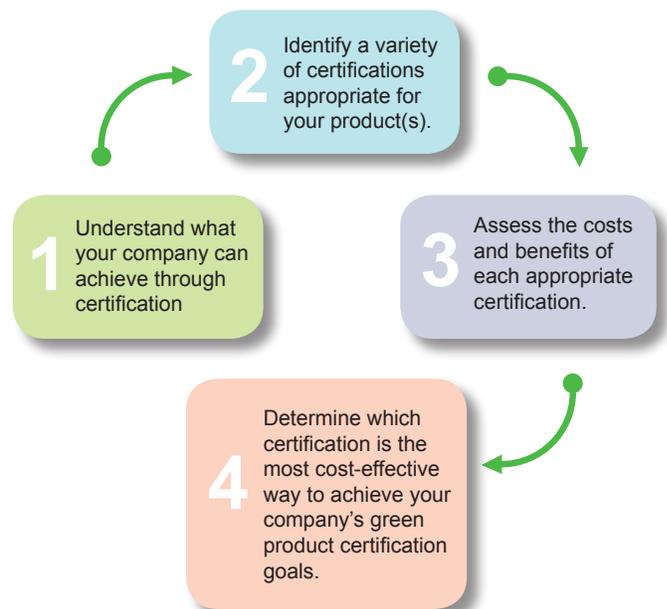
Chouinard's process-driven approach is important for a business to keep in mind when choosing to pursue green product certification. There are many questions that accompany this decision, such as which certification will appeal most to purchasers, and which certification might have the greatest impact for a business.

These are important questions, certainly, but the first and most important question to ask is which certification is most legitimate, both in terms of its criteria and underlying philosophy, as well as its rigor during the process of certification. A careful analysis of these six labels reveals attributes of each that indicate important strengths for certain certifications as well as deficiencies for others.

Design for the Environment

The EPA's Design for the Environment (DfE), while backed by a governmental agency, has several significant issues that force the certification to lag behind comparable eco-labels. In terms of process, the standard must only be renewed every three years, a relatively long amount of time, and the EPA does not require on-site audits of manufacturing facilities; instead, product ingredient information is sent to and reviewed by a third party, usually a chemical testing company. The criteria on which the certification is based is primarily objective, as the EPA outlines some types of ingredients that are prohibited or limited to a certain percentage. However, the DfE label is most troubling in its claim that certified products are using the "safest possible ingredients," and that there appears to be leeway given in certain situations. If "safest possible ingredient" for a product is the lesser of two evils, then the DfE label is insignificant. Given the recent issues with the Energy Star certification⁷, there is certainly reason to be skeptical when it comes to government administered environmental certifications.

Steps for Choosing a Green Certification



Good Housekeeping Green Seal of Approval

Hearst Communication's Good Housekeeping Green Seal of Approval shares a few issues, but holds potential. On-site audits are not required for this label, and the label is lacking in transparency when compared to the most successful, rigorous environmental certifications. A point system is used internally, but is not publicly available or advertised. Its criteria, while hitting on common areas such as ingredient safety, material composition, energy efficiency, and packaging, could be made more specific and objective. Its criteria also lack the thoroughness and complete life-cycle consideration found in the criteria developed to support the underlying philosophies of the Cradle to Cradle and SMaRT certifications, for example. However, Good Housekeeping's Green Seal of Approval, which has only been awarded to nine products, is still in its infancy and will continue to develop and improve in the future. Currently, however, there are other more transparent and rigorous certifications that products can strive to achieve.

EcoLogo

The EcoLogo program, a very established, widespread program contains a few praiseworthy features, but in our opinion, has some serious drawbacks that hold it behind other certifications. First, on-site audits, while

sometimes required, are not always required. The certification is only renewed every 3 years, and certification can be achieved in a relatively short time, compared to other certification programs. While these alleged shortcomings may be desirable to potential certification seekers, they may ultimately diminish the value of the EcoLogo certification itself, once the dust settles and the various certification programs are more thoroughly vetted by the marketplace. Although EcoLogo's criteria are all very clear, objective and readily available, they are often brief and basic and the rigor with which they are applied is not apparent. In addition, it is likely that a larger percentage of products qualify than is desirable, as 7,818 products have earned EcoLogo certification, more than twice as many as the number of certifications awarded by Green Seal, and twenty times as many certifications as awarded by Cradle to Cradle. These issues are only compounded by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing's status as a for-profit organization.

Green Seal

The Green Seal certification does not have these same pitfalls. Its certification process is very reliable, with product submittals or on-site audits always required. The process is long, usually requiring three months, and the certification itself must be renewed every year. Its standards are credible and completely transparent. Green Seal Inc. is an ANSI-accredited standards developer⁸, assuring that their standards have a great deal of merit. What Green Seal certification lacks, however, is a thorough consideration of the product's entire life cycle, like that found in the Cradle to Cradle certification.

Cradle to Cradle

For the Cradle to Cradle certification, end-of-life considerations, renewable energy use and corporate social responsibility are considered of equal importance in evaluating a product along with its material health and water and energy use. Cradle to Cradle certification was developed along stringent visionary guidelines that seek to eliminate the concept of waste and rewards products that have been designed with material reutilization in mind. Unfortunately, the certification process is not designed as well as the products that Cradle to Cradle certifies. Cradle to Cradle Certification was

originally developed by the sustainability consulting firm McDonough Braungart Design Chemistry (MBDC), and this company usually consults for the products that become certified, creating a clear conflict of interest. The non-profit Green Products Innovation Institute was established by McDonough and Braungart to help remedy this issue, but Cradle to Cradle is still inextricably linked to MBDC and the certification process lacks transparency when compared with Green Seal or SMaRT.

From the consumer's point of view, the ideal certification would be one that combines the visionary philosophy of Cradle to Cradle with a streamlined, thorough process like Green Seal, thus ensuring that a product so certified is truly environmentally "friendly." This certification exists, and it is the up-and-coming SMaRT certification.

SMaRT

SMaRT takes complete consideration of a product's full life cycle, looking at its human and environmental safety, reuse, reclamation, bio-based or recycled materials, and more. SMaRT takes a 'triple bottom line' approach, incorporating even social justice components into its criteria. Its point-based criteria, which were developed as a part of a consensus-based process over the course of five years with leading environmental NGOs, government agencies, and academic institutions, have incorporated over 50 other respected standards. MTS has even become an ANSI accredited standards developer itself. In addition, the process is fully transparent, requires independently conducted life cycle analyses and uses the third party accounting firm Ernst & Young to perform on-site audits.

This is not to say that pursuing SMaRT certification at the present time is the right choice for all companies seeking to certify their products. There are certainly more factors to consider. A small business may not have the resources to go through the more rigorous certification and auditing processes, or have the funds to pay certification fees. It could also be the case that sustainability is not an important factor for a certain product's target market. With that said, it is not a coincidence that the most prominent green building certification system, LEED⁹, is also the most rigorous.

In Conclusion

For both the consumer and the company seeking to certify their products, ultimately the most beneficial green certifications, from both a societal perspective as well as an economic one, will be those that prove to be comprehensive and exactly applied, as well as flexible enough to respond to changing standards and improved technology.

Sources

¹ <http://www.greenedge.org>

² <http://www.ecologo.org>

³ <http://www.mbdc.com/detail.aspx?linkid=2&sublink=8>

⁴ http://www.mts.sustainableproducts.com/SMART_product_standard.html

⁵ <http://www.goodhousekeeping.com/product-testing/history/>

[about-green-good-housekeeping-seal](#)

⁶ <http://www.epa.gov/dfe/pubs/projects/formulat/label.htm>

⁷ A March 2010 investigation by the Government Accountability Office revealed that of twenty fictional products that the GAO submitted for Energy Star certification, fifteen were approved, including a “gasoline powered alarm clock”, revealing that most of the certification process consisted of self-reporting and automation. Energy Star has since begun to reform the program.

⁸ ANSI, the American National Standards Institute, accredits certain organizations as competent developers of consensus based standards that follow proper due process in their development process. Accredited organizations are subject to neutral third-party oversight from ANSI, assuring quality and fairness in the organization’s standards.

⁹ Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, a third party green building rating system developed by the U.S. Green Building Council.



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Author Ellen Sinreich is President and Founder of Green Edge, LLC, which helps organizations develop and leverage their Green Edge Advantage with Green Edge Workshops® and Green Edge Consulting Services. Coauthor William Herrmann was a 2010 Green Edge Summer Intern and is a full-time student at Brown University.

Green Edge, LLC, 1755 York Ave., NYC 10128 • 212 828 3840 • info@greenedgellc.com • greenedgellc.com

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