

NEWS LESSON

How Green Adverts Win Our Trust

BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. Which words on a product make it sound environmentally friendly?
2. Do you trust a simple green label or want more detail?
3. Would a smaller choice of well-explained products make shopping easier?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**muted**	☐	A	uses something unfairly for your own benefit
2	**exploits**	☐	B	situations where you give up one good thing to get another
3	**defensible**	☐	C	new plans or actions to solve a problem
4	**offsetting**	☐	D	soft and not bright
5	**trade-offs**	☐	E	able to be supported with good reasons
6	**initiatives**	☐	F	decided that a complaint was right
7	**assertions**	☐	G	balancing out damage by paying for good work elsewhere
8	**upheld**	☐	H	strong statements that something is true

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

A muted green label, a photograph of leaves and a reassuring phrase can make an ordinary purchase feel ethical. Greenwashing works in the gap between what an advert suggests and what a company can prove.

1 The most persuasive environmental claim may be the one a consumer barely notices. A muted green label, a photograph of leaves and a reassuring phrase about sustainability can turn an ordinary purchase into something that feels almost ethical. Few shoppers can investigate the full history of every product, so they rely on signals. Greenwashing exploits that reliance: it offers the comfort of a responsible choice before the evidence has earned it. The visual language does part of the argument without ever becoming a claim that can easily be tested.

2 Its most effective forms are rarely crude lies. A manufacturer may truthfully advertise recycled packaging while glossing over the resources consumed by the product itself. An airline may invite passengers to fund climate projects without explaining the uncertainty around their benefits. Each statement can contain a defensible fragment of truth while the overall impression remains flattering, selective and misleading. The distinction matters because a regulator may need to judge not only the literal wording but the conclusion an ordinary customer is likely to draw from it.

3 In July 2026, Britain's Advertising Standards Authority upheld rulings against environmental advertisements from Eurowings and Qatar Airways. The regulator found that claims concerning carbon offsetting risked persuading customers that they could pay to compensate fully for the emissions associated with particular flights, without adequate evidence. An offset scheme may fund useful work, but the questions are practical: would the work happen anyway, will the benefit last and can it be measured? A promise to compensate for emissions is not equivalent to preventing the emissions in the first place. That distinction rarely troubles a passenger at the point of booking, which is precisely where the claim does its work.

4 Regulators are attempting to narrow the gap between marketing language and substantiated performance. Since September 2026, EU consumer rules have restricted vague environmental claims and unreliable sustainability labels, while addressing certain claims of climate neutrality based on offsetting. The shift places greater responsibility on businesses to explain their environmental credentials rather than falling back on broad, emotionally appealing phrases. It also recognises that consumers rarely possess the information required to challenge complicated scientific assertions on their own. The burden of proof, in other words, has shifted towards the companies whose claims must now stand up to scrutiny.

5 The challenge is that environmental performance involves trade-offs that resist simple labels. A reusable product may have a higher manufacturing footprint but a lower impact over time. Recycled materials may reduce pressure on natural resources without eliminating energy consumption or pollution. An advertising system that reduces such questions to a cheerful green symbol risks creating false confidence even when genuine improvements have occurred. Simplification is not dishonest in itself; it becomes so when the complications are quietly set aside.

6 There is a danger, too, that fear of regulatory action encourages companies to say nothing about worthwhile initiatives. The solution is not to ban environmental communication but to tighten it up. Claims should identify the specific benefit, the evidence supporting it and the limitations of the improvement. Consumers are entitled to know whether a company has substantially reduced harm or merely found a flattering way to describe a modest change. Sustainability cannot become credible while remaining principally a matter of choosing the right adjectives.

Sources: UK Advertising Standards Authority. Picture: AI illustration.

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. A company could be criticised for an advert in which every individual statement is true. T F NG
2. The writer believes offsetting schemes never fund useful work. T F NG
3. The airlines appealed against the rulings of the Advertising Standards Authority. T F NG
4. The writer argues that simplifying environmental information is dishonest in every case. T F NG
5. Judging a product only by the emissions from making it could give a misleading picture. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

adequate **complacency** **credentials** **equivalent** **flattering** **negligible** **scrutiny** **substantially**

1. Any company making bold environmental promises should expect close _____ from journalists and regulators.
2. The portrait of the factory was so _____ that it ignored its pollution record entirely.
3. Paying for a tree to be planted is not _____ to cutting your own emissions.
4. The data supplied was not _____ to justify so sweeping a claim.
5. A brand that wants to demonstrate its environmental _____ should publish independent results.
6. Emissions at the plant have fallen _____ since the new system was installed, though not to zero.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. The company's refusal to publish data raised doubts about the _____ of its claims. (CREDIBLE)
2. Critics described the slogan as _____, since it implied a benefit that did not exist. (DECEIVE)
3. Stricter _____ should discourage companies from exaggerating their achievements. (REGULATE)
4. Offsetting schemes are often criticised for their lack of _____. (TRANSPARENT)
5. The firm's _____ to admit the limits of its product damaged public trust. (RELUCTANT)

7 Language focus: linking words

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. These are formal. Albeit introduces a contrast, hence gives a result after a semicolon, and notwithstanding is followed by a noun.

albeit **hence** **lest** **nonetheless** **notwithstanding** **thereby** **whereby**

1. The advert was accurate in its wording, _____ misleading in its effect.
2. _____ the airline's good intentions, the claim could not be defended.
3. Most customers do not read the small print; _____ , vague slogans carry far more weight than detailed data.
4. The EU introduced a system _____ companies must explain their claims with evidence.
5. Offsetting can fund useful projects; _____ , it does not remove the emissions already produced.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. What would a useful environmental label actually tell you?
2. Who should have to prove a green claim is true?
3. Would you trust a brand more if it admitted where it still caused harm?

9 Role-play: which bottle should we buy?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the shopper

You are in a shop with a friend. You want to buy the bottle with green leaves and the word eco on it. Explain why you like it and why you think it is a good choice.

Student B · the friend

You are not sure the label is true. Ask what the label really proves. Ask at least two questions, then decide together which bottle to buy.

Useful phrases

I'd like to buy this one, it looks greener.

What's the label actually telling us?

That doesn't prove anything.

I'm not sure we can trust it.

Let's check the figures before we decide.

Shall we buy the plain one instead?

Afterwards, tell the class which bottle you chose and why.

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 D · 2 A · 3 E · 4 G · 5 B · 6 C · 7 H · 8 F

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 F · 5 T

5 Vocabulary

1 scrutiny · 2 flattering · 3 equivalent · 4 adequate · 5 credentials · 6 substantially

6 Word forms

1 credibility · 2 deceptive · 3 regulation · 4 transparency · 5 reluctance

7 Language focus

1 albeit · 2 Notwithstanding · 3 hence · 4 whereby · 5 nonetheless

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