

# EFFECTIVE CONSUMERISM IN THE GREEN SPA MARKET

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*The outcome of any serious research can only be to make two questions grow where only one grew before.  
--Thorstein Veblen*

As an organic gardener and once long-time vegan (now mostly vegetarian), I've always been interested in how to care for the environment and how to make wise decisions when purchasing food and personal care items for my family. I'm a fervent label reader and an overprotective mother, so I suppose it was celestial providence that dropped a massive work project into my proverbial lap during the fall of 2007: Help customers become effective consumers in the green spa market by researching our products for them. As a technical copywriter for Universal Companies, I would carefully study our products to appropriately label them with their respective earth-friendly attributes.

It wasn't long before my desk was fashioned into a multitude of malformed stacks, virtually unrecognizable from the immaculate look it once boasted, pushing my self-diagnosed OCD to new limits. I examined ingredients lists, scrutinized each ingredient therein, and researched the textile industry. This was an intimidating assignment --several hundred ingredient lists had to be analyzed along with the textile manufacturing standards of several vendors. I conducted most of my research online and learned about Öko Tex certification, ISO 14001 standards, bamboo, organic vs. regular cotton, and various chemicals found in lotions, oils, and creams. During my exploration, I found a myriad of viewpoints regarding "all natural" ingredients, as there are no regulations in the US. Therefore, it seemed the more I researched, the more questions I developed.

Interestingly, some companies claiming "all natural" on their labels listed cocamidopropyl betaine and polyethylene glycol alongside aloe vera and organic lavender. There are two viewpoints concerning this: Ardent environmentalists argue that cocamidopropyl betaine (a coconut-based petrochemical detergent) and polyethylene glycol (also referred to as PEG, a petroleum based surfactant) should not be considered natural because they are created in labs, not by nature. However, common consumers feel that if the ingredient is derived from a natural source (such as coconuts or crude oil), it should be considered natural. Nevertheless, after studying both perspectives, I surmised that the problem with defining "green" is the wide spectrum of consumer and vendor definitions. Furthermore, there are other debates over the definition. Some believe it means that a product is vegan, a few believe that it simply means no parabens or petrochemicals, and others opine that the product has to be 100% organic.

Because we are in the spa industry, we devote ourselves to ensuring peaceful havens exist in this overly expeditious world, providing holistic care to those who seek it. Yet, some of the products and servic-

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es that we offer are in direct opposition to the environmental cause. Clients want consistency between our practice and our menus, plus we must consider that some green attributes are more important to them than others. In essence, how does one straddle this myriad of viewpoints, find products that meet all of the requirements, and avoid greenwashing? These are significant concerns for spas, resorts, and individual practitioners.

Surprisingly, the basis to being an effective consumer in the green spa market is implausibly simple. After months of heavy research and vendor interrogation, I found one perpetual, invariable truth: The means to successfully navigating through hundreds of products touting “earth-friendly” attributes relies on our willingness to read labels, ask questions, and offer a variety of sustainable choices. This will effectively empower the environmental cause while enabling one to graduate from the inquisitive to the authoritative.



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