What's in a Name?

We may be well advised to never judge a book by its cover, but what about judging a product by its label? That's getting harder to do as the number of labels multiply exponentially and the objectivity of the labels seems to shrink.

Green is big business and businesses, no strangers to spindoctoring, aren't adverse to luring consumers to their products – touting their organic/fair-trade/all-natural/bird-friendliness, among other things. What's more, a study by TerraChoice Environmental Marketing in Canada revealed that greenwashing – making claims to present a product as more eco-friendly than it really is – is thriving on the shelves of North America. Indeed, such claims as "energy-efficient", "chemical-free" or chlorofluorocarbon-free were false and misleading.

It's enough to make any shopper reach for a cup of organic (or is it?) tea…or perhaps a fair-trade chocolate bar.

Ronnie Cummins, director of the Organic Consumers Association, is on top of the wave of labels coming consumers' way. He admits that, while consumers may be a bit confused by labels, they still tell pollsters "the more information the better."

Cummins comes clean on the labels we can trust…and those we can label "misleading":

USDA/Certified Organic: This is a third-party certification that actually has substance. "These products are inspected and monitored by independent third-party certifers operating under uniform and transparent standards," explains Cummins. For personal care products, buyer beware. A new certification – OASIS – has been created by the industry and is ostensibly legit. However, it allows ingredients that wouldn't pass muster with the "official" organic standards. A study in spring 2008 sent shockwaves through the industry when it was revealed that some leading self-proclaimed "organic" brands contained carcinogenic chemicals. While most have at least a few individual "certified organic" ingredients, these top-selling brands were not USDA organic certified, thereby allowing the presence of synthetic toxins. www.ams.usda.gov/nop

Label Confusion

It's not always easy to tell if the products you buy are actually organic. Look closely at your labels and you'll be able to find truly organic products, like the ones shown here.

Green your morning java

The only commodity that ranks higher than coffee in terms of worldwide trade dollars is oil. Over 400 billion cups of coffee are consumed every year. And when it comes to coffee consumption, America ranks #1.

In fact, we consume one fifth of the world's coffee. So, who's producing our morning hook-up? Usually small-scale farmers who live in some of the world's poorest countries. Often, these people work for meager wages and many farm owners work at a loss. Anyone can see that this is not a recipe for success, much less sustainability.

What's different about fair trade coffee?

As members of this program, coffee growers are insured a minimum price for their coffee that is greater than the cost of production. About 60% of all Fair Trade coffee is also certified organic. So tomorrow morning when you buy that first cup of coffee, start the day off knowing that your caffeine fix contributed to a farmer's livelihood, not their economic downfall.

Who Knew?

Since 2003, Dunkin Doughnuts has only served 100% Fair Trade coffee.

Top 10 Coffee Producing Nations:

Brazil, Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Mexico, Ethiopia, India, Guatamala, Cote d'Ivoire, and Uganda.

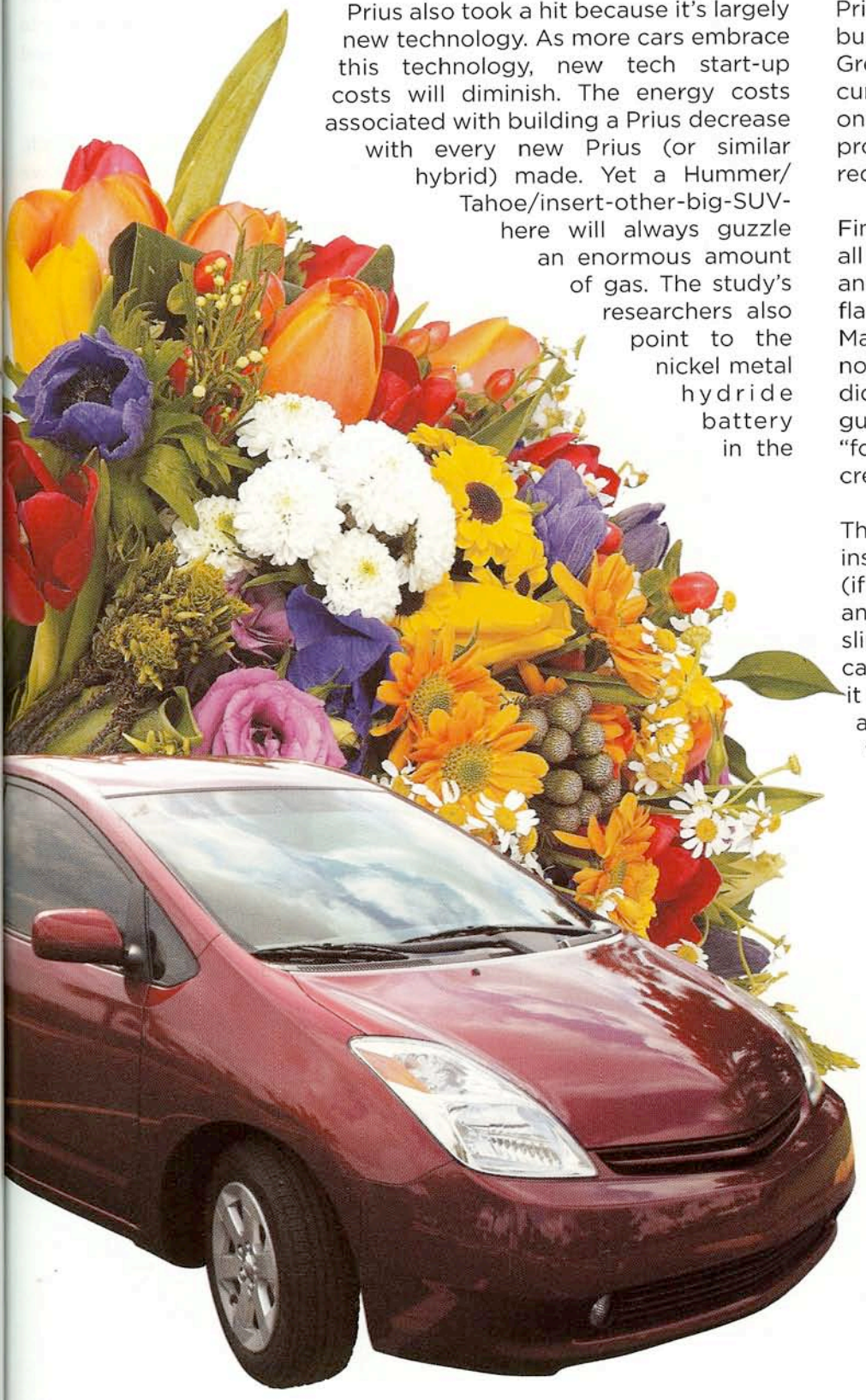
HUMMER vs. HYBRID

Plenty of ink and megapixels were dedicated last year to a study that purported to expose the true cost - in environmental terms - of a Prius and concluded that it was really no more "green" than a Hummer. Like all good urban legends, this one was catapulted into mainstream media by questionable science, shock value and gleeful SUV-devotees.

Yet, despite many, many refutations, this rumor persists. Perhaps "Hybrid a better eco-choice than Hummer" just doesn't sell papers. Whatever the reason, it's time to bury this one. For good.

The study, conducted by CNW Marketing Research Inc., actually reported that "Hybrids consume more energy in lifetime than Chevrolet's Tahoe SUV". Hummers mistakenly entered the equation when a widely syndicated columnist cited the study under a headline that read "Use a Hummer to Crush a Prius". Tahoe/Hummer. To-may-to/To-mah-to. Let's not split hairs.

The study boils down to a "dust to dust" analysis - the total energy used to build, maintain, operate, and recycle a car. The study assumed that a Hummer would last 379,000 miles and last 35 years, while a Prius would die at 12 years with only 109,000 on its odometer. An odious assumption that - on a per-mile basis - is clearly going to put the Hummer on top and created an apples-to-oranges comparison.



Prius also took a hit because it's largely new technology. As more cars embrace this technology, new tech start-up costs will diminish. The energy costs associated with building a Prius decrease with every new Prius (or similar hybrid) made. Yet a Hummer/Tahoe/insert-other-big-SUV-here will always guzzle an enormous amount of gas. The study's researchers also point to the nickel metal hydride battery in the Prius, noting that nickel mining is a dirty business. Yes, it is. Yet the Sierra Club's "Mr. Green" explains that the hybrid batteries currently in existence require less than one percent of the world's annual nickel production. Prius batteries are also 100% recyclable.

Finally – and perhaps most damning of all – the study was not peer-reviewed and CNW itself has admitted somewhat flawed figures. John Heywood, with the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, notes that "I can only guess at how they did the detailed arithmetic." Why only guess? CNW refuses to release its data "for competitive reasons", says study creator Art Spinella.

The upside of all the debate this rumor inspired is that it encourages conversation (if not conservation!) about fuel-efficiency and perhaps lets the halo over the Prius slip a wee bit. While it remains the poster car for the environmentally concerned, it still is a car – with embodied energy and a reliance on fuel. The Prius, while a worthy alternative and a promising new technology, still isn't as eco-friendly as your two feet, two wheels...or even a bus pass.

Paper Vs. Plastic

Ah yes...paper vs. plastic. The age-old question that launched a thousand others. Disposable vs. cloth. Local vs. organic. Leather vs. "pleather"...

I could take the easy way out and reply "neither." Truth is, a disposable option is rarely a better choice than a reusable one. And clearly the green consumer market has caught on, offering up any number of reusable alternatives to paper and plastic. From the polyester EnviroSac that folds up tiny enough to be tucked into a pocket to the coveted Anya Hindmarsh designed "I Am Not a Plastic Bag" that doubles as a purse, reusable seems all the rage. Looks, however, can be deceiving.

In spite of the fact that reusable bags are so darn...available, far too few of us are using them, leading to that inevitable question at the checkout: Paper? Or plastic...

It's impossible to get away from the fact that plastic is a petroleum product, gulping 12 million barrels of oil each year to make only the bags consumed in the U.S. And though reusable bags are getting plenty of play these days, they've barely made a dent in Americans' love affair with plastic bags. According to Washington-based think-tank Worldwatch Institute, Americans use 100 billion plastic bags a year – or 330 for each and every citizen. Most of them are thrown away where they'll languish for centuries in a landfill or make their way into lakes and oceans, wreaking havoc with marine life that accidentally ingest them, or adding to the enormous garbage Atlantis between San Francisco and Hawaii. (See "The North Pacific Garbage Patch" on page 98

The prognosis on paper is a bit better but not much. Fourteen million trees give their lives every year so that we can carry home our groceries. While paper is technically biodegradable, unless it's recycled it's likely to get buried in a landfill where it rarely receives enough oxygen or sunshine to begin decomposition. And decomposition, if it occurs, releases methane into the atmosphere (though larger landfills often collect this methane for use as a biogas). Recycling is a better possibility, though the process requires energy, which is frequently achieved by burning fossil fuels. Recycling also produces something imaginatively named "sludge", basically the unusable material left over including ink, plastics, filler and short fibers, which is either buried in a landfill, burned, or used as fertilizer.

Thus, if one is absolutely forced to choose, I think paper wins by a narrow margin (ha!). But given the proliferation of reusables, the clear winner is a bag that lives on...as a bag.