Claims That Earn Trust

A practical guide to evidence, comparisons, environmental language, sourcing and responsible marketing

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Evidence-based business education for leaders, managers, founders and growth-focused teams. This paper is educational content, not legal, investment, accounting or other professional advice.

Contents

Reference numbering is paper-specific. Figures and tables are original to this paper unless otherwise stated.

Executive summary

A trustworthy business claim is not merely a sentence that is technically true. It must also be scoped so that a reasonable reader is unlikely to take away a broader or different message than the evidence supports. Regulators repeatedly emphasize this principle. The U.S. Federal Trade Commission says environmental claims should be backed by competent and reliable scientific evidence and warns against broad, unqualified claims such as “green” or “eco-friendly” that are difficult to substantiate [1-2]. The UK Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) organizes its Green Claims Code around truthfulness, clarity, material information, fair comparison, lifecycle context and substantiation [3-4].

This paper gives managers, marketers and founders a claim-evidence chain: define the claim, set its scope, gather evidence, establish the comparison baseline, qualify limitations, approve the final wording and monitor whether the evidence remains current. The same discipline applies beyond environmental marketing. Performance, quality, safety, savings and “best” claims can all mislead when the implied message exceeds the proof.

Environmental language receives special attention because it is a high-risk example of scope failure. “Recyclable,” “lower carbon” and “made with recycled content” can be meaningful when the product, geography, lifecycle stage, percentage and baseline are clear. “Sustainable” or “planet-friendly” can imply broad benefits that a narrow piece of evidence does not establish. Responsible communication is therefore an evidence-management process, not a disclaimer exercise.

Audience and questions addressed

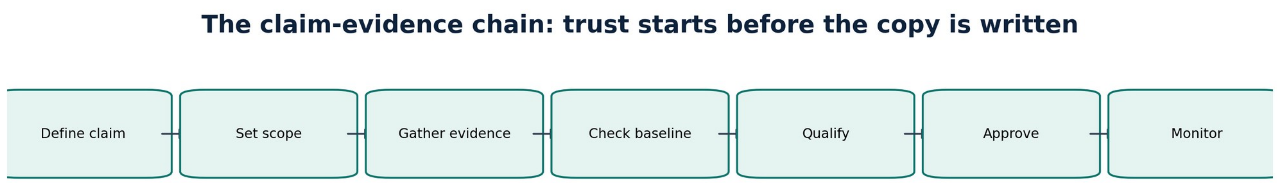
Intended audience: founders, marketers, sales leaders, product managers, procurement teams and executives who approve public claims. Questions addressed: What makes a claim supportable? How should comparisons be structured? What is different about environmental claims? How can organizations collect evidence across suppliers? What decision process can reduce misleading overstatement?

1. Trustworthy claims start with scope

Before asking whether a claim is true, ask what it means to the audience. “Uses 30% less energy” is incomplete without a baseline: less than which model, process or previous version, measured under what conditions and over what period? “Made with recycled material” may need a percentage and clarity about whether it refers to the product, packaging or both. The FTC’s Green Guides emphasize qualifying claims so that consumers are not misled about the extent of an environmental benefit [2].

Scope has at least six dimensions: object (product, package, service or company); geography; time period; lifecycle stage; comparison baseline; and conditions of use. A claim can be accurate on one dimension and misleading in aggregate. For example, a packaging reduction may be real while the overall product footprint increases for another reason. The CMA specifically warns that claims should consider the full lifecycle and should not omit information needed for informed decisions [3].

Figure 1. The claim-evidence chain



Original infographic by BusinessReadr, synthesized from FTC, CMA and ISO guidance [1-6].

Takeaway: Marketing review should start with evidence and scope before copy approval. Qualifications are part of the claim, not a rescue device added after an overbroad headline.

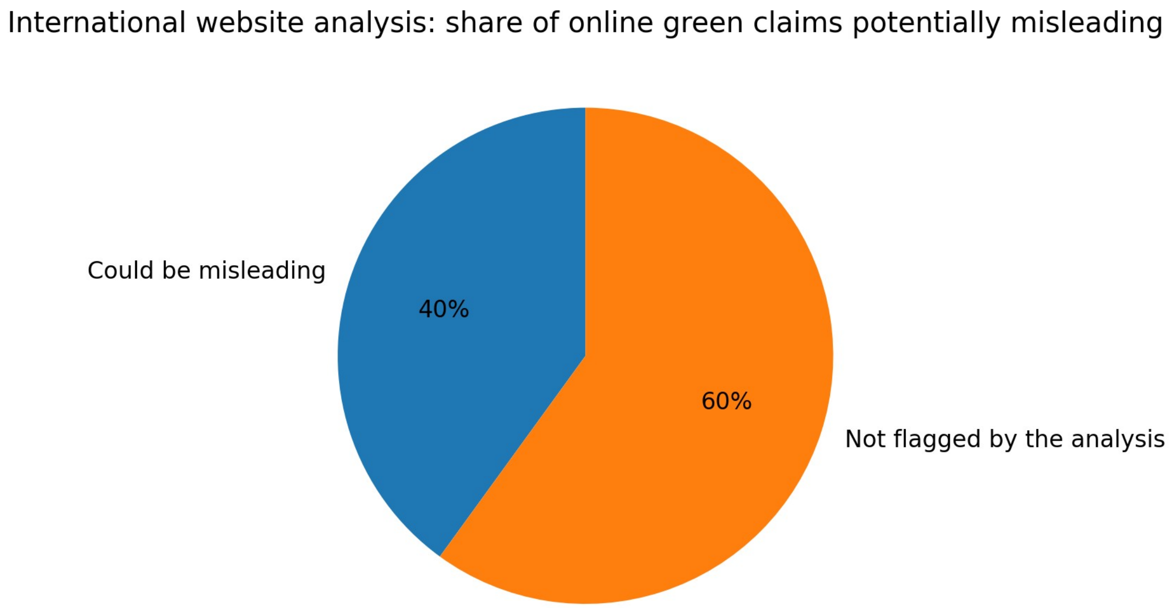
2. Evidence quality: what substantiation should look like

Evidence should match the claim. A laboratory test may support a specific technical attribute but not necessarily real-world savings. A supplier declaration may be useful but should not be treated as independent certification. A customer survey can measure perception but cannot prove physical performance. A third-party standard may define a methodology without certifying a particular product.

Useful questions include: Is the evidence current? Is the method appropriate to the claim? Was the comparison measured under equivalent conditions? Is the sample representative? Are negative or offsetting effects material? Can the organization reproduce the result? Who controls the source data? The FTC uses the phrase “competent and reliable scientific evidence” for environmental claims [1]. ISO 14021:2026 similarly addresses documentation and methodologies for self-declared environmental claims and applies to words, symbols and graphics used in advertising and digital media [6].

The evidence file should be maintained for the life of the claim. Claims can become stale when suppliers, formulations, manufacturing sites, electricity mixes, disposal systems or regulations change. Monitoring is therefore part of substantiation. A claim that was supportable two years ago can become misleading if its conditions have changed.

Figure 2. Why environmental-claim review deserves attention



Source: UK Competition and Markets Authority Green Claims Code, citing an international analysis of websites.
"Could be misleading" is a screening finding, not a legal judgment on every claim.

The CMA Green Claims Code website states that an international analysis of websites found that 40% of green claims made online could be misleading [4]. This is a screening statistic, not a determination that exactly 40% of all claims are unlawful.

Takeaway: A high screening rate is a reason for disciplined review, not a reason to avoid legitimate environmental communication.

3. Comparisons, certifications and environmental language

Comparative claims create two evidence burdens: proving the advertised item's performance and proving that the baseline is fair. "20% lower emissions" should identify lower than what and define the boundary used to measure emissions. If the compared product meets a different need, is measured under different conditions or is no longer representative, the comparison may create a misleading impression even if the arithmetic is correct.

Certifications and seals also require careful wording. A certification is evidence only for the scope actually certified. The presence of a logo should not imply government approval, whole-company certification or broader environmental superiority unless those meanings are supported. The FTC Green Guides include specific guidance on certifications and seals [1-2].

Environmental terms deserve precision. The FTC advises against broad unqualified general environmental benefit claims because they can imply extensive benefits that are difficult to substantiate [2]. The CMA's six principles likewise require claims to be truthful, clear, complete enough for informed choice, fairly comparative, lifecycle-aware and substantiated [3-4]. ISO 14021:2026 provides an international framework for self-declared environmental claims, but applicable consumer and advertising law still depends on jurisdiction [6].

Table 1. From vague claim to evidence-ready claim

Risky / vague wording	More evidence-ready wording	Evidence needed
“Eco-friendly packaging”	“Package contains 60% post-consumer recycled plastic by weight.”	Material composition records; method; current supplier documentation
“Uses less energy”	“Uses 18% less electricity per cycle than Model X under Test Method Y.”	Comparable test data; model definition; test conditions
“Carbon neutral”	State the measured boundary, period, reductions and any offsets separately.	GHG inventory method; boundary; reductions; offset quality and retirement records
“Best value”	“Lowest listed annual fee among the five named plans checked on date X.”	Defined comparison set; date; fee data; material exclusions
“Safer”	Name the specific hazard or test outcome rather than implying overall safety.	Appropriate safety testing; conditions; limitations; applicable standards

Original examples for educational purposes. Specific legal requirements vary by claim, product and jurisdiction; these examples are not legal advice.

Takeaway: The more consequential the implied message, the more important it is to state the object, metric, baseline and conditions.

4. A decision guide for claim risk

A practical review can classify claims by consequence and evidence gap. Low-risk descriptive claims are directly observable and narrowly scoped. Medium-risk comparative or performance claims require documented tests and a stable baseline. High-risk health, safety, financial-return or sweeping environmental claims can materially affect consumer decisions and may trigger specialized legal or regulatory requirements. Those claims warrant specialist review rather than stronger marketing language.

1. Write the claim exactly as the audience will see it, including headline, image, footnote and nearby context.
2. Write the likely audience takeaway in plain language. If it is broader than the intended meaning, narrow the claim.
3. Identify the evidence owner and date. A claim without an evidence owner should not be treated as fully substantiated.
4. Check the baseline and boundary: product, package, service, lifecycle stage, geography and period.
5. List material limitations next to the claim where needed. Do not hide a condition that reverses the headline impression.
6. For supplier-based claims, define the verification level: supplier statement, audit, test report or recognized certification.
7. Set an expiry/review date so the claim is revalidated when inputs or standards change.

5. Responsible use across the supply chain

Claims often depend on information that a marketing team does not generate: recycled-content percentages from packaging suppliers, emissions factors from logistics providers, ingredient specifications from manufacturers or certification status from third parties. The CMA’s January 2026 explainer emphasizes responsibility for green claims across the supply chain and encourages businesses to manage evidence and legal risk collaboratively [5].

Procurement can therefore improve marketing integrity by making evidence requirements part of supplier onboarding and contract management. Useful records include methodology, scope, test date, facility, material batch where relevant, auditor or laboratory identity, and change-notification obligations. This does not make every supplier statement independently verified, but it creates traceability and makes the level of assurance transparent.

Finally, responsible claims should survive translation into sales scripts, ads, product pages and partner materials. A carefully qualified claim can become misleading when a reseller drops the qualifier or turns “may reduce” into “will reduce.” Claim governance should cover downstream reuse and provide approved wording rather than relying on disclaimers after the fact.

Reader checklist

- Can a reasonable reader understand exactly what the claim covers?
- Is the evidence type suitable for the claim being made?
- Is the evidence current, reproducible and owned by someone accountable?
- For comparisons, are products, conditions and time periods genuinely comparable?
- Are environmental claims specific about lifecycle stage, percentage, geography and baseline where relevant?
- Does any seal or certification imply more than the certifier actually verified?
- Are important limitations visible where they affect the likely takeaway?
- Will suppliers or partners notify you when evidence-relevant inputs change?
- Is there a review or expiry date for the claim?

Conclusion

Trustworthy marketing begins before the copy is written. Define the claim, map its likely interpretation, match evidence to the implied promise, state meaningful limits and maintain the evidence over time. That process protects reader value because it makes business communication more informative, comparable and testable. It also allows genuine improvements - including environmental improvements - to be communicated with greater confidence and less overstatement.

Research method and limitations

This whitepaper is a narrative evidence review prepared from publicly accessible primary research, official statistics, regulator guidance, standards-body material and authoritative technical documentation available as of the publication date. It is not a systematic review and does not claim to identify every relevant study. Evidence from experiments may not generalize to every industry, geography or organization; observational findings can show association without proving causation; and regulatory requirements vary by jurisdiction and can change. Readers should test recommendations against their own operating context and obtain specialist advice where decisions carry legal, financial, safety or other material consequences.

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References

[1] U.S. Federal Trade Commission. Environmental Marketing guidance. View source

[2] U.S. Federal Trade Commission. Environmental Claims: Summary of the Green Guides. View source

[3] Competition and Markets Authority (UK). Green Claims Code: making environmental claims. View source

[4] Competition and Markets Authority (UK). Check your Green Claims - six key principles. View source

[5] Competition and Markets Authority (UK) (2026). Making green claims: getting it right, across the supply chain. View source

[6] ISO 14021:2026. Environmental statements and programmes for products - Self-declared environmental claims (overview). View source

[7] U.S. Federal Trade Commission. Advertising and Marketing guidance. View source

[8] OECD (2019). Good Practice Guide on Online Advertising: Protecting Consumers in E-commerce. View source

Appendix A. Underlying chart data

Table A1. Green-claims screening statistic

Category	Share
Could be misleading	40%
Not flagged by cited analysis	60%

Source: CMA Green Claims Code website [4]. The 60% figure is the arithmetic remainder used to visualize the reported 40% screening statistic, not a CMA finding that every remaining claim was compliant.

Takeaway: Use the chart as context for review discipline, not as a compliance-rate estimate for a specific market or website.

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