

The contrarian

## NGO poison politics: responsibility or righteousness?

**NGO claims that vinyl is potentially dangerous to human health are irresponsible and overblown, says Jon Entine**

Is your shower curtain poisoning you? Considering that many of us shower frequently, this is a frightening question. This latest environmental scare illustrates what can happen when non-governmental organisations abandon their moral compass. It ultimately hurts consumers and investors, and leaves the environment no better off.

As is often the case in scares, there is just enough confusion for a campaigner with a predetermined agenda to massage the facts. It is true that shower curtains, children's toys, medical products, and even car interiors – we are all familiar with that new car smell that you either love or hate – give off faint traces of what are called “outgases”. But how dangerous are they?

Environmental extremists say products made with PVC, polyvinyl chloride, leak toxic substances into the air, water and food supply, causing everything from coughs to cancer.

Here's the science: vinyl has been safely used for decades and it is inexpensive relative to its alternatives – a boon to corporations and consumers alike. A 2002 report by the US Food and Drug Administration found zero incidents of adverse human health effects from using plastic intravenous bags and medical tubing, let alone from vinyl shower curtains.

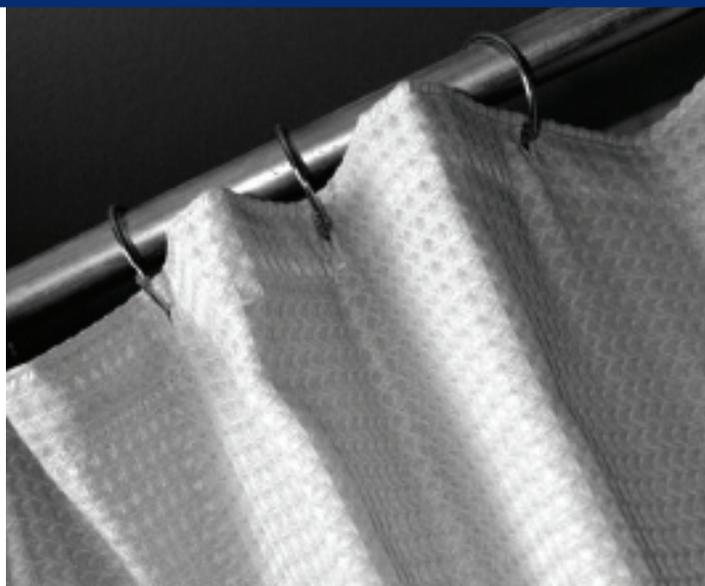
Bill Clinton's consumer product safety commissioner, Mary Sheila Gail, dismissed a petition by Greenpeace to ban the use of PVC in toys, noting: “Consumers may have a high level of assurance that soft plastic products pose no risk to children.”

### Unfair target

Rigorous peer-reviewed studies have not dissuaded the righteously named Center for Health, Environment and Justice, the point group for anti-vinyl activists, from passing around “toolkits” designed to intimidate retailer Target from selling products made with or packaged in “poisonous chemicals”. With the local media in tow, protestors planned to invade Target stores, cordoning off aisles with “toxic scene” tape.

Corporations that appease campaigners to look more “socially responsible” not only leave themselves open to repeat attacks, but they also undermine other businesses trying to operate in accordance with real, instead of hysteria-driven, environmental standards.

“If governments, NGOs and other participants in civil society weaken the ability of business to operate productively,” say Michael Porter and Mark Kramer in last December's “Harvard Business Review”, “they may win battles but will lose the war, as corporate and regional competitiveness fade, wages stagnate, jobs disappear,



Not poisonous, at all

and the wealth that pays taxes and supports non-profit contributions evaporates.”

Activist NGOs can play a useful role as public gadflies. Everything from fuel efficiency standards and air bags in cars to clean air and water regulations came about in part because activists challenged the established, and often outdated, ways of thinking about the environment. But they walk a fine line, which they clearly have crossed in their zeal to demonise vinyl.

Activists are also worming their message into the mainstream media. Quoting almost verbatim from anti-vinyl “information sheets”, a consumer reporter for a Minneapolis paper recently complained that vinyl curtains and tote bags “stink terribly” because they release “toxic” chemicals. Her

advice: “Don't buy the product.” The article was disseminated around the world and ended up being reproduced on anti-vinyl websites, a key viral campaign strategy.

### Over-reaction

If outgases were as harmful as critics make them out to be, the government would be forced to regulate a host of everyday products, including mobile phones, iPods, and even freshly printed newspapers. The slight outgas given off by many new products poses only the slightest risk, and then only to the tiniest fraction of the population extremely sensitive to certain chemicals – people who should not talk on a new Blackberry or read this magazine for fear of a reaction.

NGOs that casually exaggerate or outright deceive, such as in the blunt campaigns against genetically modified crops, nuclear power, and now vinyl, risk fraying the threads of reasonableness that keep open societies together. “The most important thing a corporation can do for society, and for any community, is contribute to a prosperous economy,” write Porter and Kramer. “Governments and NGOs often forget this basic truth.”

Regulators have so far resisted the hysteria mongering, which is the key reason why activists are now going after companies with highly visible brand names. Target is just the latest target. Let's hope more corporations have the fortitude to draw a line in the sand. ■

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