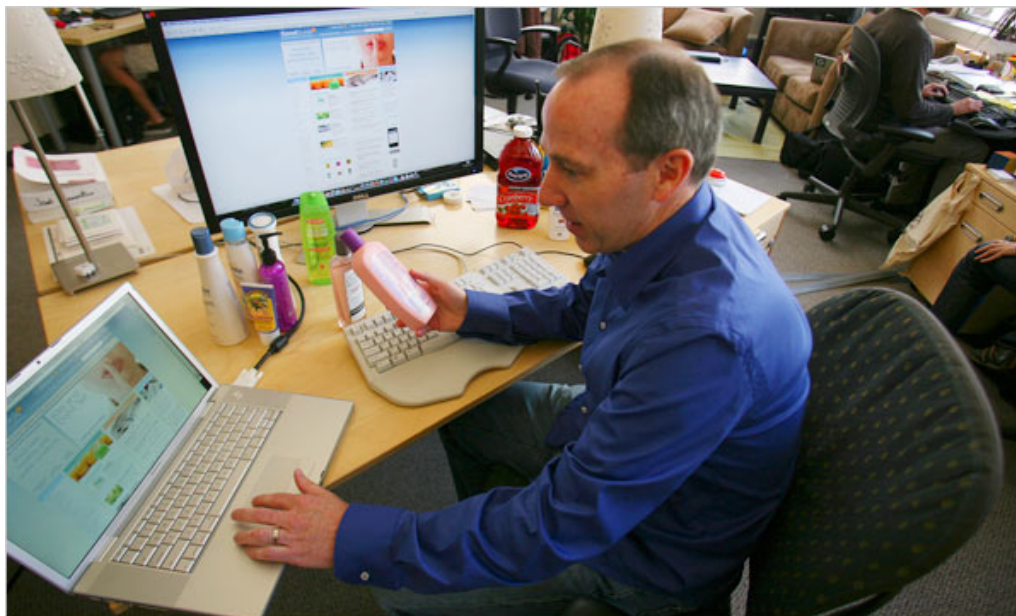


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On Web and iPhone, a Tool to Aid Careful Shopping

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Dara O'Rourke created GoodGuide to evaluate products, sometimes searching via the bar code.

SAN FRANCISCO — These days, every skin lotion and dish detergent on store shelves gloats about how green it is. How do shoppers know which are good for them and good for the earth?

It was a similar question that hit Dara O'Rourke, a professor of environmental and labor policy at the University of California, Berkeley, one morning when he was applying sunscreen to his young daughter's face.



He realized he did not know what was in the lotion. He went to his office and quickly discovered that it contained a carcinogen activated by sunlight. It also contained an endocrine disruptor and two skin irritants. He also discovered that her soap included a kind of dioxane, a carcinogen, and then found that one of her brand-name toys was made with lead.

And in looking for the answer, he hatched the idea for a company that used his esoteric research on supply chain management. "All I do is study this, and I know nothing about the products I'm bringing into our house and putting in, on and around our family," Mr. O'Rourke said. But when he wanted to find that information, he could. Most consumers would struggle to do so.

Hence [GoodGuide](#), a Web site and [iPhone](#) application that lets consumers dig past the package's marketing spiel by entering a product's name and discovering its health, environmental and social impacts.

“What we’re trying to do is flip the whole marketing world on its head,” said Mr. O’Rourke. “Instead of companies telling you what to believe, customers are making the statements to the marketers about what they care about.”

A few years ago, Mr. O’Rourke noticed that at the end of his lectures, audience members were raising their hands to ask which kind of laptop or sneaker or lotion to buy. Americans are becoming increasingly interested in what is in the stuff they buy. (Mr. O’Rourke’s research caught mainstream interest once before when, in 1997, his report on [Nike](#)’s factories in Vietnam led to an uproar over that company’s labor conditions.)

Although the GoodGuide Web site, which started in September, had only 110,000 unique visitors in April, Mr. O’Rourke is encouraged that it is growing about 25 percent a month. Lately, interest in GoodGuide has begun to extend beyond techies and the [Whole Foods](#) crowd to the [Wal-Mart](#) crowd, as Mr. O’Rourke put it. One sign of that broader appeal: [Apple](#) recently featured the app in its iPhone ads.

GoodGuide’s office, in San Francisco, has 12 full-time and 12 part-time employees, half scientists and half engineers. They have scored 75,000 products with data from nearly 200 sources, including government databases, studies by nonprofits and academics, and the research by scientists on the GoodGuide staff. There are still holes in the data that GoodGuide seeks to fill.

Users enter a product’s name to get scores. For instance, Tom’s of Maine deodorant gets an 8.6 in part because it has no carcinogens, while Arrid XX antiperspirant rates a 3.8 because it contains known carcinogens. Another click leads to information behind the scores, like whether an ingredient causes reproductive problems or produces toxic waste, or whether the company has women and racial minorities in executive positions or faces labor lawsuits.

Mr. O’Rourke began gathering data in 2005 with the help of computer science graduate students at Berkeley and \$300,000 from foundations. The do-gooder in Mr. O’Rourke, however, did not prevent him from seeing the commercial possibilities of what was being compiled.

Persuading venture capitalists to finance his idea was trickier. In 2007, he was rejected by dozens of firms over six months. The green tech investors were not interested in a start-up that did not make alternative energy. The Web investors were not interested in one that was not going to get 50 million users overnight and sell ads.

One of the most prominent Internet investors in Silicon Valley walked out of the room after snidely dismissing GoodGuide with: “Hmm, a noble cause.” GoodGuide eventually raised \$3.7 million from New Enterprise Associates and Draper Fisher Jurvetson.

GoodGuide does not sell ads and does not plan to, in part because Mr. O’Rourke will not take money from a company whose product is rated on the site. It makes a small fee if customers click on links to [Amazon.com](#) or [TheFind](#) and buy the product.

The basic site will always be free, he says, but GoodGuide may someday charge subscription fees for personalized versions. It also plans to license data to governments and retailers. It could help a state avoid buying paper cups with ingredients from a certain country, for example, or enable a drugstore chain to list a product’s GoodGuide score next to the price tag.

This summer, GoodGuide will add a deeper database for users who want more detail by, for example, reading the academic studies on which ratings may be based. The next version of the iPhone will enable people to scan bar codes to get scores, rather than type in the product’s name.

Some companies, including [Clorox](#) and SC Johnson, have agreed in recent months to reveal more about the ingredients in their products because of gathering consumer concern. That will enable GoodGuide to fill gaps in its data. Federal law does not require makers of household products to list all ingredients.

“What we think of now as green is a marketing mirage,” usually based on a single environmentally friendly practice, said Daniel Goleman, author of “Ecological Intelligence,” who switched deodorants and shampoos because of GoodGuide. The site could potentially “have a revolutionary effect on industry and commerce,” he said, by educating shoppers about the ramifications of buying a particular product.

That could also be the problem with GoodGuide, said John R. Ehrenfeld, executive director of the International Society for Industrial Ecology. He worries that by collapsing dozens of data points into a single number, GoodGuide does not adequately inform consumers about each consequence of each ingredient.

“Consumers need to be very carefully educated as to what these scores mean if it’s going to serve the purpose GoodGuide says it does,” he said.