



green buzzwords in the built environment: the online search edition

Are Americans searching for the green building buzzwords you're using - and which words are performing the best?

green buzzwords in the built environment: the online search edition

Words matter – especially the words you use to describe your organization, your products and your services.

And online? The stakes are even higher.

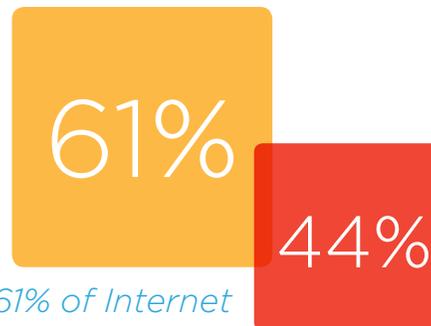
HubSpot estimates that 61% of Internet users across the world research products online, and 44% of online shoppers begin by using a search engine – contributing to over [100 billion](#) searches per month conducted on Google alone. Combine this with the fact that 60% of all clicks go to the organic top three search results, and it's easy to see why your visibility and ranking on major search engines is something you should be investing in. And that means choosing the right keywords is critical.

Keep online visibility in mind when you're talking about green building to consumers.

In 2015, as part of our annual [Eco Pulse™](#) study, we polled American consumers to find out which green buzzwords were powerful and which ones fell flat, and we shared our findings in a free report, [The Buzz on Buzzwords](#). We tested the umbrella terms “green,” “sustainable” and “eco-friendly,” measuring respondents’ instant reactions to the words on several different scales. We also tested knowledge and perceptions of several terms we’d describe as green jargon (i.e., “low-VOC” and “net zero”) – they tout specific sustainability features and frequently appear on packaging or in advertising, but they may mean more to the people who make the products than to the people who buy them.

In this report, we're taking that data one step further.

We've analyzed these terms (and several more terms frequently referenced in relation to green building) to assess their power online – looking at how many people are actually using them in search queries, how interest varies by region, and how interest in these terms has varied over time. The trends we've uncovered should serve as an excellent high-level guide for reference when formulating your organization's search engine advertising and/or organic keyword strategy.



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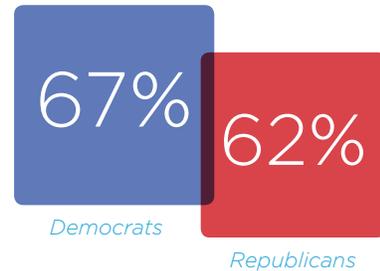


evaluating the big 3:
green,
sustainable
& eco-friendly



keyword: green

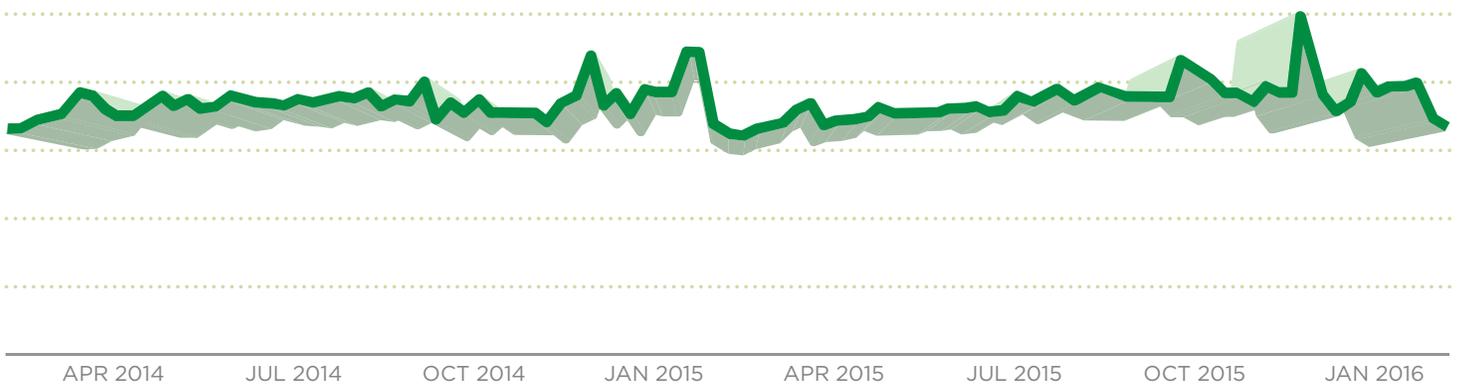
In [The Buzz on Buzzwords](#), we showed that the term “green” makes a positive impression in the minds of consumers. It was considered desirable by 65% of respondents, and this statistic even transcended political affiliation, with 67% of Democrats stating that the term was desirable compared to 62% of Republicans – a statistically insignificant difference. A majority of respondents also felt the term “green” was important, positive, good for personal health, and easily understood.



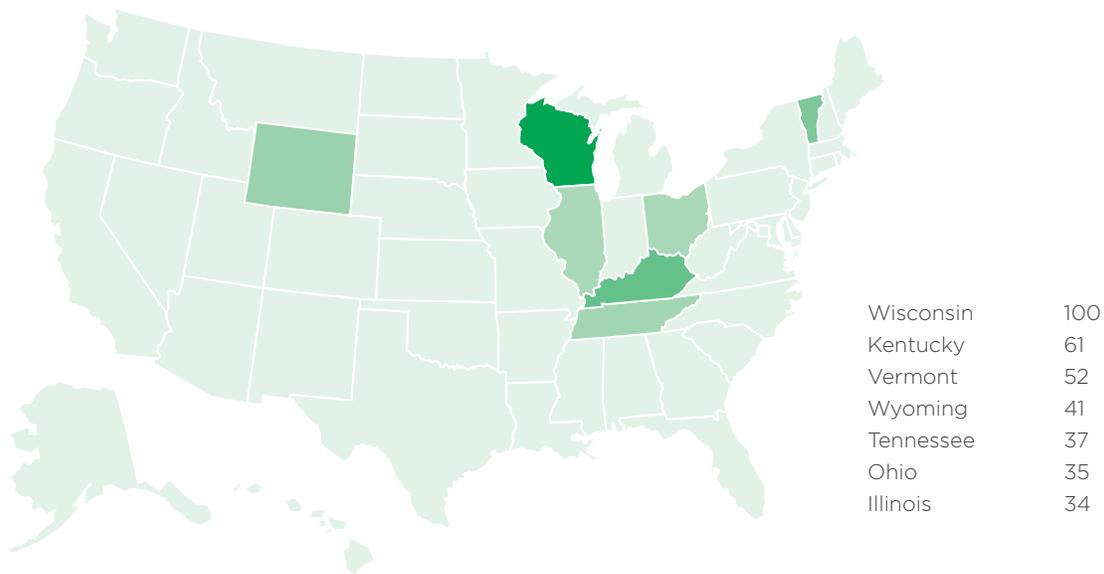
How does the term “green” perform on Google?

The word “green” enjoys a high amount of search traffic every month, both in the United States (110,000 searches per month on average) and worldwide (368,000 searches per month on average). And the good news for green marketers is that Google associates the term strongly with things like sustainable building, “going green” and the environment.

Over the past two years, interest in the term “green” has remained relatively constant in the U.S., with the occasional event-related spike. When we remove Wisconsin and Kentucky from geographic data (due to the high number of search terms related to “Bowling Green” and “Green Bay”), regional interest around the term “green” is highest in Vermont. While the Green Mountains in Vermont may have an effect on the data, the state of Vermont generally has a strong association with the environment – a finding that shows up clearly when digging into the specific Google search terms used within the state. Interest in the term also shows up fairly consistently across the country.



Interest in Search Term Over Time, as Measured by Google Search Volume in the U.S.



Average Regional Interest in Search Term, as Measured by Google Search Volume in the U.S.
Feb. 2014–Jan. 2016

Our advice: The term “green” is popular online, and a large number of people are searching for green things every month. Combined with the fact that “green” is generally viewed as a positive trait by consumers, we recommend using the word throughout your online sustainability story if it fits. Just one caveat: whenever possible, combine “green” with a relevant identifier (i.e., energy, home, construction, etc.) – otherwise, you’ll be competing for rank with general searches for the word “green,” which pits you against green tea, green-bean recipes and the Green Bay Packers (a battle you’ll probably lose). So be as specific as possible.

110,000

110,000 searches per month on average for the term “green” in the U.S.

The search data supports our finding from Eco Pulse 2015 that two-thirds of the population claims to be searching for greener products.

green



keyword:
sustainable

keyword: sustainable

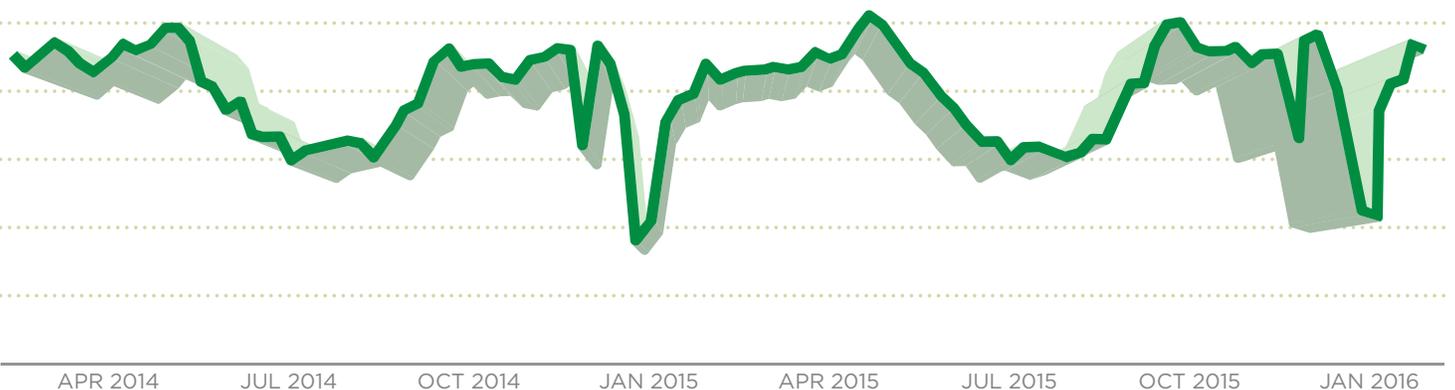
[The Buzz on Buzzwords](#) showed that numbers for “sustainable” were slightly less impressive than for “green.” While the term actually registered slightly higher as an understandable term, it received a less positive rating overall. However, a majority of respondents did still deem the term “sustainable” desirable, positive, important and good for health.

How does the term “sustainable” perform on Google?

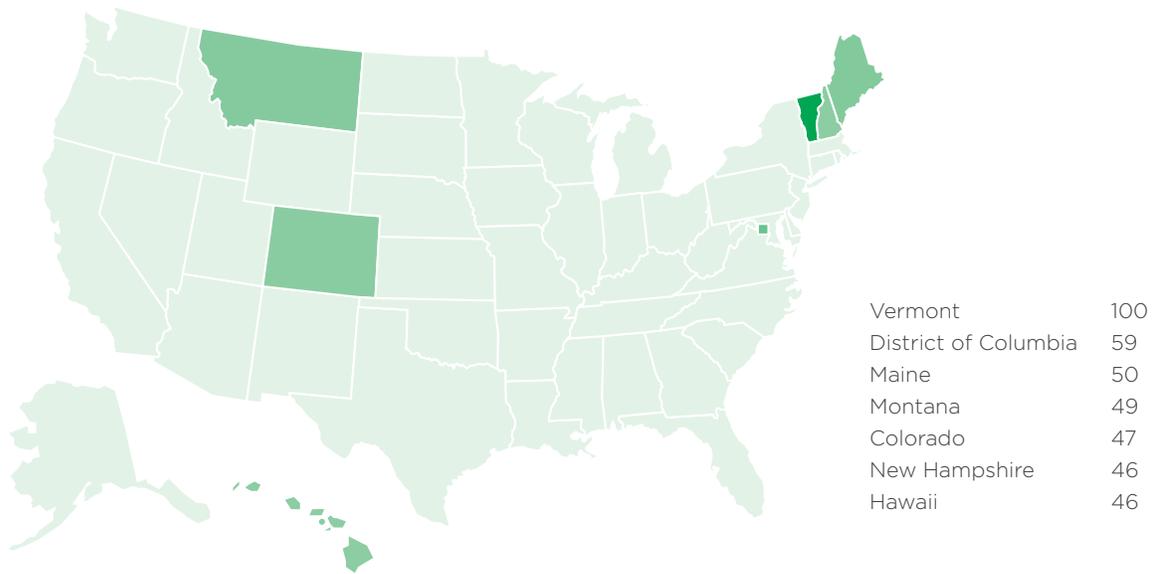
The term “sustainable” enjoys a moderate amount of search traffic every month, both in the United States (18,100 searches per month on average) and worldwide (60,500 searches per month on average). But the word has only a few related meanings (as opposed to “green,” which can mean a dozen different things), so when people are searching for it, you can be fairly sure what they’re looking for. The word is consistently used to describe environmental impact, or the business implications of environmental impact. “Sustainable” also enjoys surprisingly low levels of competition – meaning that it might be relatively easy to rank for this term and related keywords on Google.

Of note: the related term “sustainability” is much more popular with online searchers, receiving over 250% more searches per month than its cousin (49,500 searches per month on average in the U.S., to be exact). This term also enjoys low levels of competition.

If you look closely at the graph of search interest over time, a telltale pattern emerges for “sustainable.” The dips and spikes are almost identical year over year, with interest bottoming out during the times people are likely to be on vacation from work. (Note the bowl-shaped depression during the summer months and the sharp downward spikes around Thanksgiving and Christmas/New Year’s.) This points to a useful bit of information: “sustainable” is almost certainly a business term that people search for as part of their jobs. As our earlier *Buzzwords* research suggested, it hasn’t really caught on with consumers yet. (Except maybe in Vermont, which is once again at the head of the class – as you’ll see on the next page.)



Interest in Search Term Over Time, as Measured by Google Search Volume in the U.S.

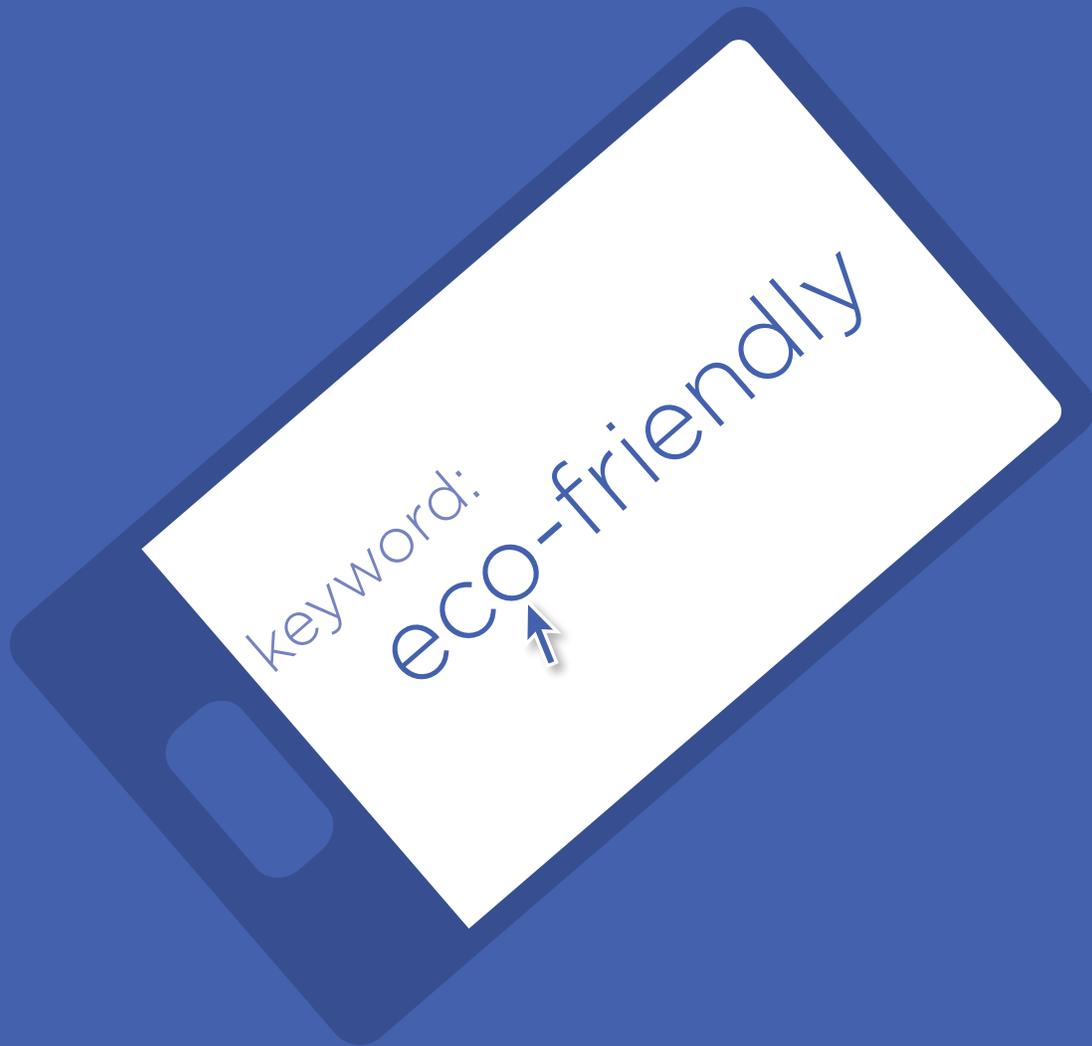


Average Regional Interest in Search Term, as Measured by Google Search Volume in the U.S.
Feb. 2014-Jan. 2016

Our advice: While the term “sustainable” received a slightly less positive rating in comparison to “green” in our consumer survey, the term has a narrower definition and enjoys relatively low amounts of competition online, making it a better target keyword for your SEO and SEM efforts. Even better is the term “sustainability,” which is the more frequently searched term.

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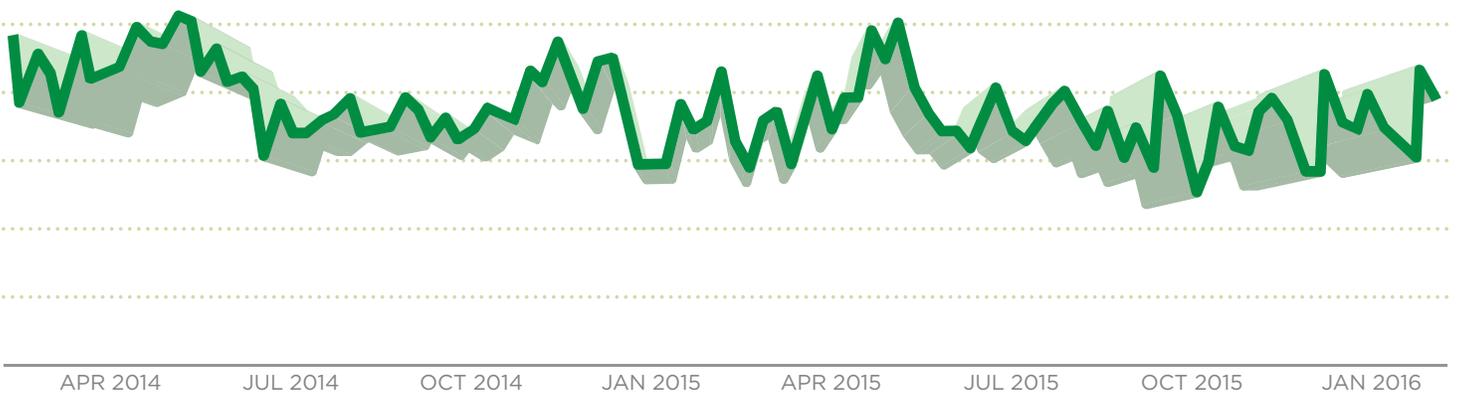
keyword: eco-friendly

As we reported in [The Buzz on Buzzwords](#), the term “eco-friendly” performed slightly better than “green” in our consumer survey, though not significantly so. More respondents thought it was positive, fewer thought it was negative, and more claimed to understand it. In total, 67% of survey respondents thought that the term “eco-friendly” was desirable.

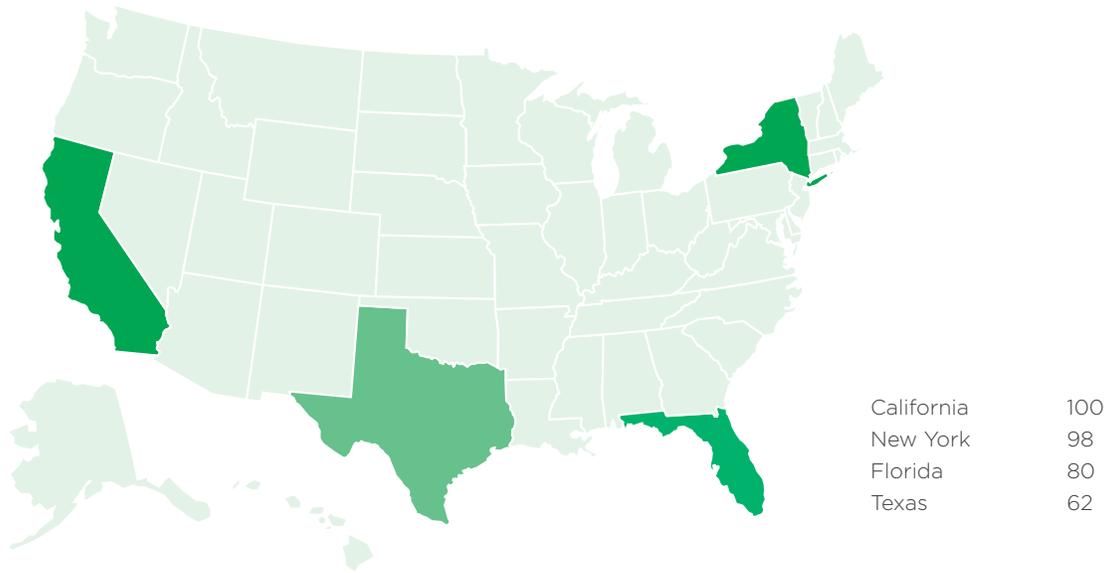
How does the term “eco-friendly” perform on Google?

The term “eco-friendly” receives a moderately low amount of search traffic every month, both in the United States (6,600 searches per month on average) and worldwide (27,100 searches per month on average). This term and related search terms are fairly difficult to rank for, with many organizations competing online to rank for keywords related to eco-friendly products (i.e., “eco-friendly cars”) and how-tos (i.e., “how to be eco-friendly”).

Over the past two years, online interest in the term “eco-friendly” has been extremely variable in the U.S., experiencing dramatic shifts over time. Geographically, things get more interesting, with the vast majority of searches conducted in just four states: California, New York, Texas and Florida. Although sample sizes for individual cities skew too small to draw definitive conclusions, these states are home to some of the largest metropolitan areas in the country, so our theory is that “eco-friendly” plays well to an urban audience.



Interest in Search Term Over Time, as Measured by Google Search Volume in the U.S.



Average Regional Interest in Search Term, as Measured by Google Search Volume in the U.S.
Feb. 2014–Jan. 2016

Our advice: While the term “eco-friendly” is viewed as the most positive of the “Big 3” buzzwords in the sustainability space, it gets the least search traffic, and many companies are competing for the little traffic that does come along. If you’re looking to rank online for a specific eco-friendly category, or are targeting California, New York, Florida and Texas, be prepared to put in the work to optimize here. Otherwise, we suggest focusing your efforts on “sustainable/sustainability” and/or “green” instead.



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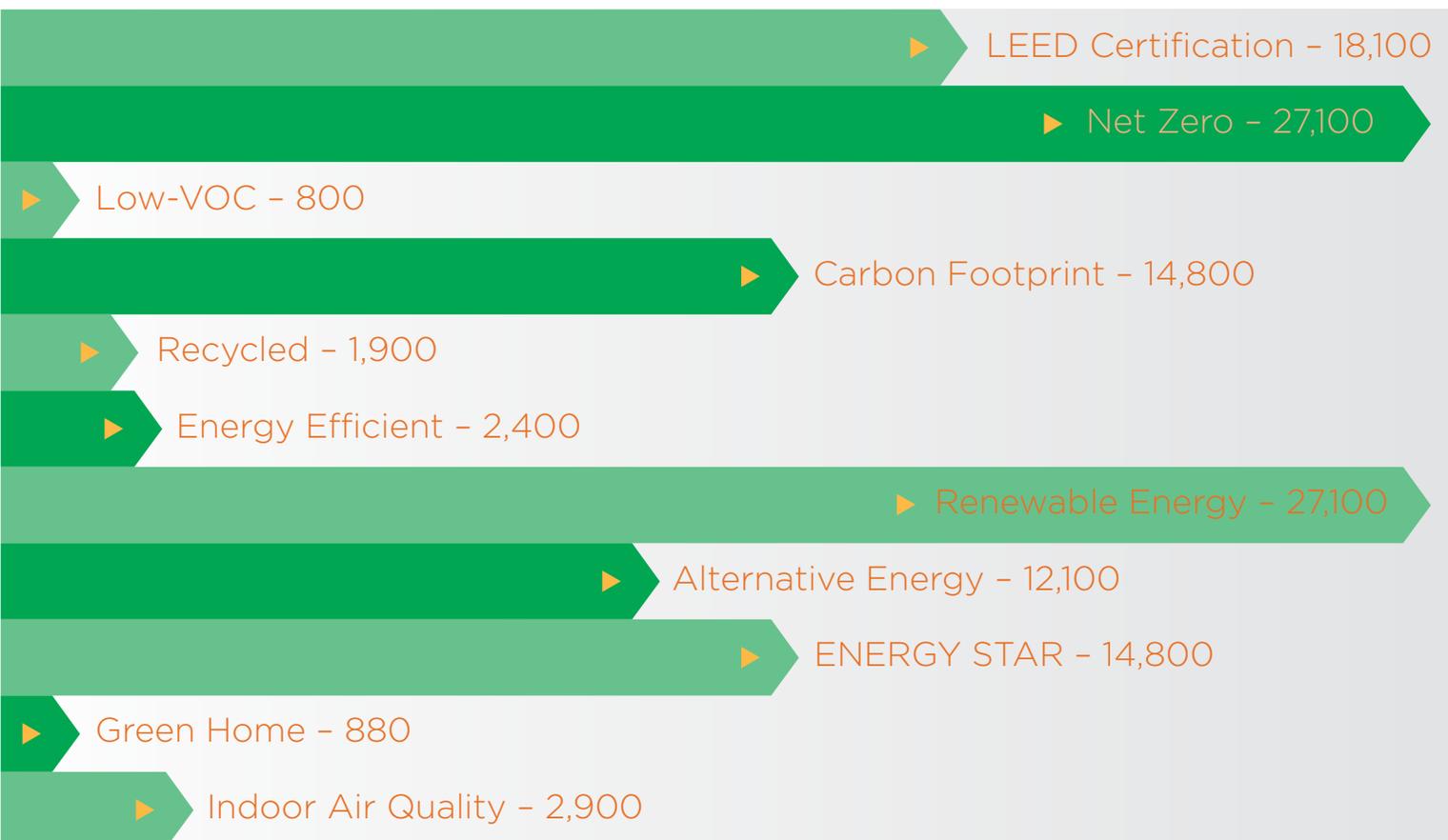
how does green industry jargon fit into all of this?

[Eco Pulse 2015](#) found that when it comes to the sustainability jargon used by marketers, there's a correlation between what consumers think they know the most about and what they like. If a term confuses them or they aren't familiar with it, they react to it with a certain degree of negativity, conscious or not. And there's a connotation issue at play: terms that contained negative-sounding words (i.e., "low" or "zero") were the least popular of all.

How does this translate online?

We looked at 11 search terms related to green building (five that we tested in [The Buzz on Buzzwords](#) plus six other important industry terms) to see how much consumer interest exists on Google for each.

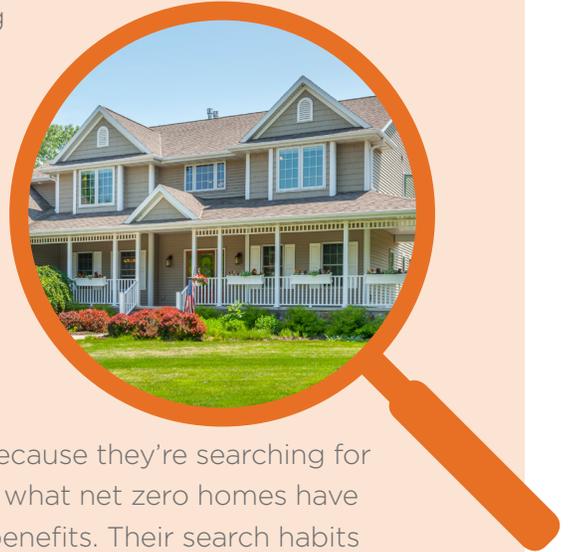
U.S. average monthly searches Feb. 2014–Jan. 2016



our take:

“Low-VOC” tanked as a search term, living up to its [Buzzwords](#) reputation as a buzzkill for consumers (it was the least popular and least understood term we tested in Eco Pulse). The terms “indoor air quality” and “green home” also fell on the lower end of the search spectrum, meaning that it might be more beneficial to speak about other home attributes when marketing green buildings and building products directly to consumers.

One fascinating opportunity we see, though, is the immense search popularity of “net zero” compared to other keywords. Eco Pulse respondents told us they didn’t understand this term and didn’t like it – but perhaps they’re curious about it and are trying to find out more, because they’re searching for it in droves. Our research tells us consumers value what net zero homes have to offer, but they don’t connect the term with its benefits. Their search habits tell us they’re asking you to make that connection.



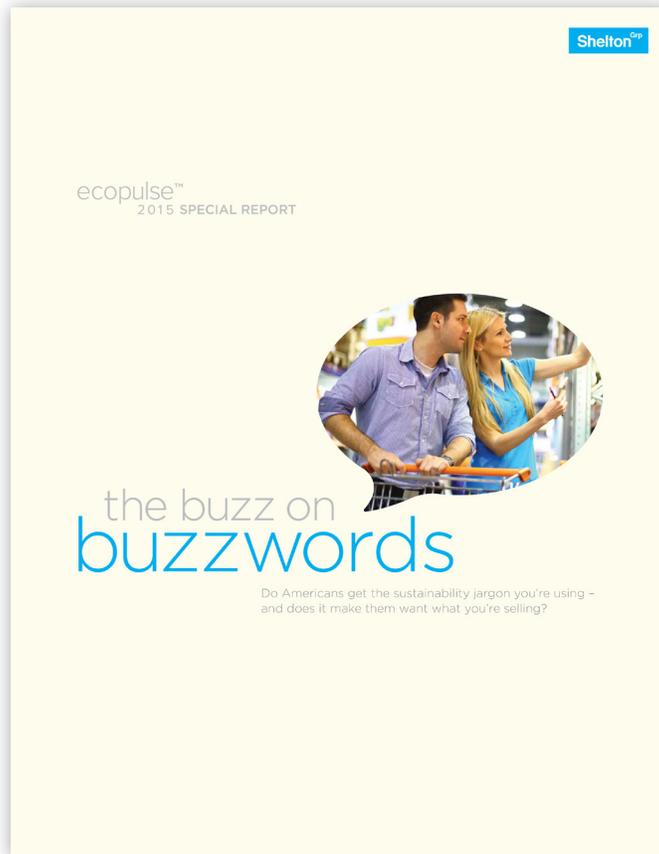
a word of caution

As you’re probably aware, the Federal Trade Commission revised its Green Guides for marketers in 2012 to take a tougher stance on the use of green buzzwords.

As per those revised guidelines, we don’t recommend using any of the generic umbrella terms (green, eco-friendly or sustainable) to make broad claims about a product’s environmental benefit. Without context, these three words can set unrealistic consumer expectations for how virtuous a product really is. Given these terms’ strong performance in our testing, it’s easy to see how consumers might translate a positive gut reaction into overly optimistic assumptions.

Always give specific context that makes your product’s particular environmental benefit clear. If you use these words, we recommend you do so as part of a larger messaging strategy or sustainability story that is transparent, thorough and specific.

download our companion report,
the buzz on buzzwords



methodology

Data referenced in this report was pulled from our proprietary Eco Pulse 2015 study, Google Trends data (taken from all U.S. searches, February 2014-January 2016), and monthly search data listed in the Google AdWords keyword planner tool (taken from both U.S. and worldwide searches, February 2014-January 2016).

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