

WHAT'S GREEN IS GREY: MAKING MORE INFORMED CHOICES

A few years ago, a household FMCG brand was keen to promote a global campaign to activate one of its most lucrative, high-profile sponsorships. A proposal for a glossy, informative brochure was rejected because the company's marketing department decided that print was bad for the environment. The quest for a greener alternative led the brand to produce a deluxe dvd set instead. But was opting for a material made up of metals, plastics and glass better for the environment than paper?

LET'S EXPLORE THE FACTS...

HUMAN ACTIVITIES IMPACT THE ENVIRONMENT

Although the impact of some actions, products or industries are seen as better or worse than others, every human action - every flight, every meal, every purchase, has some sort of impact on the natural environment. The transport industry has long been linked to air pollution and ever since the first tree was felled to make a newspaper, print has been linked to deforestation.

Brands know that a distinctive feature of the modern consumer is their growing demand for environmentally friendly and socially responsible products and services, so many marketing strategies now include a variety of green claims, such as 'pure', 'natural' or 'eco-friendly'. These prevalent marketing messages, combined with the fact that people tend to draw an emotive conclusion that print is damaging forests, could have factored into why the FMCG brand opted for DVD over a brochure.

BEING INFORMED TO BE ETHICAL

Being green is not a black and white issue and common assumptions are often wrong. Take an apple for example. A study from a university in New Zealand found that apples grown in New Zealand and shipped to the UK for consumption had just 185g CO2 emissions per kilo, which ended up being significantly lower than apples grown in the UK which had 271g per kilo. The reasoning behind this was that farms in the UK use more fossil fuels and require more cold storage than the ones in NZ that have a cleaner electricity mix. In this instance, consuming locally isn't always the 'greenest' option.¹

It's a similar situation when looking at paper versus digital communications. Reading a newspaper can consume 20% less carbon than viewing news online. Also, all paper are not all made equal. Whilst recycled papers have environmental benefits using pulp-waste, the additional energy consumed to produce recycled paper can sometimes see the better choice being paper that has been sourced from sustainable forests.



KEY STATS

1 hour of video streaming uses the same amount of electricity it takes to power a hair dryer for 30 minutes per day for a year.

Reading a newspaper can consume 20% less carbon than viewing news online.

An apple from New Zealand to UK emits 185CO2 emissions compared to one grown and eaten in the UK

If the 'Cloud' were a country it would be the sixth largest consumer of energy after the USA, China, Russia, India and Japan, but ahead of Germany and Brazil.

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IT'S ALL ABOUT CONTEXT

Many people are under the impression that if they don't buy a printed magazine, but instead view that magazine online, they are saving trees. In this case, and in many other cases, the solution is not as simple: globally, the single leading cause of deforestation is actually for agricultural purposes, not the paper and print industry.² And contrary to common beliefs, over the last five (5) years in Australia, the area of forest has increased by 308,000 hectares which is the second highest gain of any country in the world.³

Further, in Australia the wood, paper and print industry contributes to only 5.3% of total energy consumption compared to the 33.3% consumed by non-ferrous metal producers.⁴ In New Zealand, the paper industry gets up to 80% of its energy from renewable sources including biomass, geothermal and NZ's electricity grid.

If assumptions can be made to inflate the negative environmental impact of an industry, they can also be made to favour other industries too.

THE NOT-SO-WHITE CLOUD

The cloud has allowed us to move everything online and because it is invisible to the consumer's eyes, its environmental impacts often go unnoticed. Yet, the cloud is powered by a series of high energy-consuming computers and "if the cloud were a country, it would be sixth in the world in terms of energy consumption — after the USA, China, Russia, India and Japan, but ahead of Germany and Brazil."⁵

The internet is currently responsible for about 2% of the globe's overall power consumption. Kerry Hinton, former Director of the Centre for Energy-Efficient Telecommunications at the University of Melbourne, estimates that without a major change, in about 10 years the internet will be responsible for 20% of global power consumption. He is optimistic that this is an estimate of the "upper limit" of ICT power consumption as energy efficiency has been improving over recent years.

Digital behemoths such as Apple are investing to avert the danger; its data centres are now completely powered by renewable energy which will certainly help to slow down power consumption of digital technology.

Another issue that goes unnoticed is the growing amounts of electronic waste which is the fastest growing waste stream in Australia and, in a typical year, 20kg of e-waste is generated for every person on the planet.

NO RIGHT OR WRONG

Determining what's green is difficult and often times it's important to do your due diligence to find out the environmental credentials to ensure an informed choice is made and your brand's sustainability goals are being met. Consulting various certification systems such as ISO 14000 or sustainable forestry programs for certified paper or looking for electronics registered with EPEAT (an Electronic Product Environmental Assessment Tool) is a good start.

Ultimately, there is no right or wrong answer, and finding the 'greener' alternative may well vary from case to case. It is important to note that each industry has environmental implications that in many cases go unseen. Going deeper and finding out the facts will be key to determining the best option for your brand and its sustainability values.

Sources: 1. Berners, Lee, 2011 2. Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN FAO 3. FAO Global Forest Resources Assessment, 2015 4. Australian Energy Update, 2016 5. ABC Science, 2016