

## Opinion Piece: Going green? It's harder than you think

By Simon Webster, Technical Consultant, The Webcom Group

19 May 2010

As organisations and consumers alike feel the pressure to 'go green', they need know the full lifecycle of the products they choose in order to avoid 'the sin of the hidden trade-off'

Non-toxic? Eco-friendly? Green? Energy-efficient? Recyclable? Organic? These are terms that have become the main thrust of many a marketing campaign, particularly in recent years. There's no doubt that the uptake of 'going green' by the corporate world has led to a widespread awareness of the concept. But at what cost?

Like any well-intentioned initiative, there is the opportunity to ride on the hype to make a profit with many companies jumping on the 'green' bandwagon for this reason. However, many organisations are 'lulled' into a false sense of satisfaction that they are lessening the impact of business on the environment through their 'green' choices. But to a large extent, this is not what is happening. Even slightly reducing the overall impact of a product on the environment would be a step in the right direction, but instead many so-called green products are trading off one environmentally detrimental aspect for another - usually further down the product lifecycle and less apparent to the public eye.

To truly understand the environmental impact of a product requires assessing its entire life cycle.

### The sin of the hidden trade-off

In 2007, US environmental marketing firm TerraChoice released a study called "The Six Sins of Greenwashing", highlighting the different ways in which consumer products use deceptive environmental claims in order to make them seem like a 'greener' choice. Of the 1,018 products they surveyed, an astounding 99% were guilty of greenwashing. The six sins include: The Sin of the Hidden-Trade Off; The Sin of No Proof; The Sin of Vagueness; The Sin of Irrelevance; The Sin of Fibbing; and The Sin of Lesser of Two Evils. Last year, they released an updated survey highlighting a new 'sin' - The Sin of Worshipping False Labels (giving the impression of third-party endorsement where no such endorsement actually exists).

The most commonly employed tactic - and the most problematic one - is the Sin of the Hidden Trade-off. This is because it lays claim to a plausible environmental benefit - such as being recyclable or energy-efficient - which may be true, but the label does not disclose that other aspects of the product lifecycle may be severely detrimental to the environment.

An obvious example is the dilemma of the electric car. While it reduces carbon emissions, the 'green' component is rendered 'null and void' if the electricity that powers it is generated through the use of carbon fossils. In other words, using an electric car in countries with cleaner electricity generation processing may be a greener alternative, but it's hard to gauge the trade-off in regions where this is not the case. In the same vein, buying products made from a rapidly renewable resource, such as bamboo, may make sense in Vietnam, but the carbon impact of where they are transported to can outweigh the benefits of this 'green' choice.

There are multiple points in a product's lifecycle that determine its overall impact on the environment. And often manufacturers tend to 'green' whatever stage of their lifecycle is easiest and least expensive to do so.

So what is the solution?

The answer is obviously to gain a full understanding of a product's lifecycle in order to evaluate whether it is in fact a legitimately 'green' product. However, this can be not only a lengthy exercise, but a tiresome one. With the Internet's abundance of information, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between a genuine and reliable source of information and one that is merely a more subtle and sophisticated form of greenwashing. With this issue having come into the spotlight in the last few years, there have been more initiatives that aim to provide consumers and organisations with the knowledge to make informed decisions, offering certification of green products. There are however, limitations to how much certification can really tell you.

Aside from the 'questionable' certification labels surfacing, each life cycle assessment needs to decide on the boundary of the product's lifecycle. Does it specify whether the manufacturer uses 'green' products, or merely whether its internal production processes are deemed 'green'? And perhaps the biggest issue is that currently, gaining certification from a reputable source is a costly exercise, putting smaller businesses at a considerable disadvantage.

Ultimately, being aware of manipulative marketing tactics, as well as using what resources one has available to find out about specific products and technologies is the most valuable tool both consumers and organisations can utilise.

The case of Green IT

Unfortunately, the hype around going 'green' has blurred the lines of the real issue at hand: excessive consumption of rapidly declining resources. The above-mentioned scenario may leave one feeling slightly dreary about where to start a 'greening' initiative - because despite all the confusion surrounding the issue, the need to adapt to more sustainable and viable consumption practices remains vital for any organisation.

When implemented correctly, IT's propensity to contribute significantly to energy-savings is perhaps one of the most straightforward ways an organisation can decrease its environmental impact. Because IT equipment is generally updated every three or four years, it creates an ideal opportunity for the introduction of newer, more efficient technologies - and cost saving can be considerable, up to 50 percent in some cases.

The IT industry is by no means exempt from greenwashing tactics and companies can be blindsided by thinking they are purchasing a 'green' product when in fact the product adds to the impact on our environment at the end of its lifecycle. Take notebooks with extended batteries and hard drives that require less energy. As notebooks take over the sale of PCs and companies increasingly adopt this mobile enabler whilst patting themselves on the back that they are contributing positively to the environment through the support of these products, the question of how these notebooks are disposed of should be raised and more pertinently, how do they impact the environment at this point?

But sometimes common sense should prevail. While manufacturers' efforts to deliver 'green' products must be commended; organisations need to think holistically about 'going green' and should consider the entire lifecycle of the products or technologies they intend to use before making an investment. The corporate world's role in reducing the carbon footprint is enormous, and thus it is essential that it does not fall prey to greenwashing tactics, but rather that organisations take it upon themselves to look deeper than 'product labels', and more thoroughly scrutinise the claims made.

Contacts

The Webcom Group  
Simon Webster Technical Consultant  
Tel 0112662167  
Simon.Webster@webcom.co.za

Evolution PR  
Pat McClelland  
Tel: 011-4620628  
Email: pat@evolutionpr.co.za