

THE REAL PRICE OF PAPER

“As we progress in our endeavor to reach environmental maturity, should we not be looking at all the aspects that affect us as a society?”

THERE ARE LIES, DAMNED LIES AND ENVIRONMENTAL REPORTS WHICH, FOR ALL THEIR IMPRESSIVE RHETORIC, CAN SOMETIMES BE LITTLE MORE THAN SELF-SERVING EXERCISES IN LOOKING GOOD. KRISTINA HOLDORF IS AN EXPERT AT READING BETWEEN THE LINES AND ASKS HOW FAR WE SHOULD GO TO DISCLOSE WHERE AND HOW PAPER IS MADE.



Kristina Holdorf

Over the past couple of months I've had a number of 'independent reports' from paper mills come across my desk, all trying to outdo themselves in the environmental arena. I must admit, at first glance, these reports are analytically impressive, almost needing a science degree to unravel the quotations in between the usual environmental mumbo jumbo.

One report, however, caught my eye, as it encouraged the reader to take into account the environmental cost, in a monetary value, of any particular grade of paper compared with other similar brands. What a clever and an intriguing concept. It stated that mills should take a more responsible view of producing and marketing their products and that, if not done in an environmentally sound manner, then it should reflect that environmental burden in the price of the paper.

This brings us to the discussion of carbon trading and whether or not it's worth all the hype. In the absence of mandatory carbon taxing, carbon literate consumers are now opting to 'offset' their carbon emissions from goods or services, paying a third party to enter into a carbon absorbing enterprise (most commonly tree planting), supposedly then rendering their purchase carbon neutral. This system is quite like the one mentioned by the mill, putting a dollar value on your emissions. Whether or not you believe this is a workable concept is the topic of dinner parties of late.

I personally believe there is some merit to the program. However... I do not believe there is any system that can reverse our environmental footprint and thus should not be used as an excuse by companies to pollute.

RECYCLED IS BEST—OR IS IT?

The report continued choosing countries, including Australia, in its synopsis and considered a wide range of environmental issues dealing with the manufacture of paper. The commissioned company stated they obtained this information from what is available freely in the public domain. Needless to say, the mill producing



the document was by far the 'cheapest' environmental threat. Interestingly they noted that, through a recent telephone study, environmental issues are still lagging behind price and quality and that the perception of environmental concerns equaled RECYCLED.

I must admit that in most of my conversations with print/paper buyers, their view is that recycled is best. I'll let you in on a trade secret... it depends, but I'll save that one for another time.

The report then went into great detail about paper manufacturing from bleaching pulp to water and energy usage. It then went through an overview of the Australian and global pulp and paper markets, followed by the environmental impacts of the paper manufacturing process, including the mill's environmental credentials. Finally it compared them with those from a leading Australian paper maker and other interesting information pertaining to the global and Australian market.

CAN'T SEE THE PEOPLE FOR THE TREES

As I scrolled through the report, nowhere did I see any mention of the social impacts on each of those countries, least of all from the mill presenting the facts. Clearly a mill so overwhelmingly concerned for the environment must be equally interested in its people. A quick Google search of the paper mill on what is freely available in the public domain uncovered a number of disgusting accusations in relation to local villages and the community at large.

Mind you, this is not the first mill I have come across with social issues and no doubt not the last.

As we progress in our endeavor to reach environmental maturity, should we not be looking at all the aspects that affect us as a society? Or are we only concerned with whatever happens to be a good marketing strategy?

How far do we need to dig to get the complete picture of where and how a product is made? As environmental certification systems and credentials become the norm, will certification labeling read off like the ingredients listing? Who will educate the consumer about what is good and what is just clever marketing and shallow schemes?

Of course, these all being rhetorical questions, they still call for thoughtful consideration. Benchmarks need to be set then challenged—this is what's called progress.

So the question is: do you think that a levy should be imposed on paper products that are deemed 'environmentally hazardous'? Will this encourage consumers (print buyers) to do the right thing? I welcome your thoughts and comments on this matter affecting our industry. ●

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