"Go Green, Go Paperless" Messages Are Misleading

The Impact of Greenwashing

Consumers are increasingly aware of the impact their choices have on the environment and are influenced by environmental or green claims made by trusted organisations. Greenwash is defined as "Behaviour or activities that make people believe that a company is doing more to protect the environment than it really is", (Cambridge Dictionary) or, "Disinformation disseminated by an organisation so as to present an environmentally responsible public image." (Wikipedia)

Many leading organisations, including banks, utility companies and telecommunications providers, are urging their customers to go paperless with claims that paperless bills, statements and other electronic communications save trees, are "greener" and better for the environment.

These statements are **greenwashing**. These statements are not specific, not supported by reliable scientific evidence or relevant life cycle analyses and are misleading. Without evidence to support the claim being made such communication is Greenwashing and contravenes advertising regulations in most European countries.

Examples of misleading statements;

1. Go paperless, save trees and help save the planet
2. Move to email away from tree-mail
3. Go to digital statements and protect the environment

These statements are not just misleading but hugely damaging to an industry that employs in the UK alone, 116,000 people (1,096,000 EU), in more than 8,400 businesses (115,700 EU). Most commonly, the driving reason for this move to digital communication is cost reduction. Greenwashing is costing the UK printing and postal industries an estimated £10 million per annum.

This information sheet will provide you with valuable facts and statistics that you should consider before encouraging your customers to switch to digital communication for environmental reasons.

Data from a 2023 survey revealed that 55% of consumers believe when organisations are promoting digital as better for the environment, it's really about saving costs.[1]

Paper has a great sustainable story. Made from trees, it is a renewable and sustainable raw material and easy to recycle.

Raw materials from which digital equipment, servers and the equipment for how power is generated are often finite, precious, non-renewable materials and notoriously difficult to recycle.

Between 2005 and 2020, European forests grew by 1500 football pitches every day![2]



Myth – Going paperless saves trees and stops deforestation

It's common to see organisations make statements such as "save trees and stop deforestation" to encourage their customers to move from paper communications to electronic communications. In fact, these statements quite simply aren't true. Here's why:

A healthy market for forest products, such as paper, encourages the long-term growth of forests through sustainable forest management. Which, in turn, helps to mitigate climate change by absorbing CO_2.

Between 2005 and 2020, European forests, which provide 90% of the virgin wood fibre used by the European paper industry, grew by 58,390 km^2 – an area bigger than Switzerland and amounts to 1,500 football pitches of forest growth every day.[2]

Providing an organisation is sourcing its paper from responsible producers, they should not be concerned about saving trees. Indeed, quite the opposite.

Myth – Paper is wasteful and bad for the environment

Rather than being wasteful, paper is actually one of the most recycled materials on the planet.

In Europe, a total of 54 million tonnes of paper was collected and recycled in 2023, resulting in a recycling rate of 79%.[3] Paper packaging has an even higher recycling rate at 83%.[4]

79% of paper is recycled in Europe

83% of paper packaging is recycled in Europe

Paper making is an inherently sustainable process.

Based on wood, a natural renewable material, the paper-making process is a sustainable cycle. Both virgin fibres, sourced from sustainably managed forests, and recycled fibres, recovered from curbside collections, are used to replenish and maintain the process.

Paper for recycling is an essential raw material for the paper industry and should not be classed as waste. Of the fibre used by the European pulp and paper industry, 48% comes from virgin wood fibre and 52% from paper for recycling.[3]

The most eco-efficient use of wood fibre for paper and paperboard is within a 'cascading system'. In a simple cascading system, fresh fibre is removed from the forest and used to make wood or paper products which are recovered after use and the recycled fibres are reused in paper and board manufacturing until they are unsuitable, at which point they can be burned for energy as a bio-fuel, displacing fossil fuel with reduced carbon emissions.

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Myth – Electronic communication is better for the environment than paper-based communication

Electronic communication is not consequence free and has an environmental impact which, in our ever-increasing digital world, cannot be ignored.

The ICT industry accounted for 4-6% of global electricity use in 2020, which is more than 2% of global greenhouse gas emissions. With increasing demand, the ICT industry is expected to increase its global electricity use over the next decade.[6]

In comparison, the paper, pulp and print sector is one of the lowest industrial emitters of greenhouse gasses, accounting for 0.8% of European emissions.[5] Between 2010 and 2022, the European paper industry reduced its total primary energy consumption by 16%. The European pulp and paper industry is also the biggest single user and producer of renewable energy in Europe, with 62% of its energy consumption coming from renewable sources.[3]

The electronic waste problem is colossal and it is growing. In 2022, a record breaking 62 million metric tonnes of e-waste was generated across the world.[7] This is expected to increase to 82 Mt by 2030 unless we change our practices.

In 2022, just 22.3% of global e-waste was collected for recycling (42.8% in Europe).[7] Recycling activities are not keeping pace with the global growth of e-waste and non-environmentally sound disposal and treatment of this waste stream poses significant risks to the environment and to human health.

Raw materials from digital equipment, servers and power generators are often finite, precious and non-renewable, as well as being notoriously difficult to recycle. When electronic devices are simply thrown away, materials such as iron, copper and gold are thrown away with them, creating the need for more mining.

Making misleading statements contravenes advertising regulations

Organisations should be aware that misleading environmental claims contravene both, Defra's guidance on green claims and the UK CAP Code administered by the Advertising Standards Authority.

Regulations by The Advertising Standards Authority

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) currently evaluates green claims against the rules of the UK CAP Code, Section 11, Environmental Claims.

- **11.1** The basis of environmental claims must be clear. Unqualified claims could mislead if they omit significant information.
- **11.3** Absolute claims must be supported by a high level of substantiation.
- **11.4** Marketers must base environmental claims on the full life cycle analysis.
- **11.5** It must not be suggested that claims are universally accepted if a significant division of informed or scientific opinion exists.

For more information visit:
asa.org.uk/type/non_broadcast/code_section/11.html

Regulations by The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA)

DEFRA publishes principles for making environmental claims. This is general guidance for businesses that want to display a green credential in marketing, packaging or other communications. When a green claim is made, it should be:

- Relevant to anyone buying or using it.
- Clearly and accurately stated.
- Justifiable.

For more information visit:
gov.uk/government/publications/make-a-green-claim

Consumer Protection Legislation

With growing concern about how organisations mislead consumers, in most European countries legislation exists that companies cannot just make unsupported environmental statements without proper substantiation. This is being strengthened with the coming new legislation, the Green Claims Directive.

The UK's Competition and Markets Authority has created the Greens Claims Code. The purpose of this guidance is to help organisations understand and comply with their existing obligations under consumer protection law when making environmental claims and extends beyond advertising and marketing to cover consumer communications and service messages.

Find out more: **greenclaims.campaign.gov.uk**

Which is environmentally best – paper or digital?

The simple answer is both have impacts, and it is not possible to easily determine whether one is better than the other.

To satisfy DEFRA and other Green Claims criteria, there would need to be a complete and detailed Life Cycle Analysis (LCA) of the two alternative processes for a true comparison. These are notoriously difficult and, where reports do exist, the boundaries of the assessment are often selective to support the outcome desired.

To make an accurate comparison it is critical to consider that any form of communication has two ends, one sending and one receiving. For digital communication the recipient must open the communication on a device, the device must be charged and also has its own life cycle to consider. It is important to understand what actions an email may trigger; opening attachments, storing, sharing and many consumers print at home, with consequential impact. 58% of UK consumers say they regularly print out documents at home if they want a hard copy.[1] When paper communication is received it may be stored, recycled, burned as a bio-fuel or thrown away to biodegrade. When an organisation claims digital has a lower environmental impact, the consumers interaction must be factored into the LCA.

A recent LCA published by La Poste (National French Postal Operator) undertaken by independent research organisation Quantis, to ISO standards for life cycle assessment (ISO 14040-14044) assessed 16 relevant indicators in 5 impact areas including; ecosystems, resources, human health, water and climate change. It looked at a variety of different formats from catalogues to billing and statements where, in most cases, print came out as the most sustainable option.

For more information, visit:
solutionsbtob.laposte.fr/mediapositiveimpact

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The right to choose

Defaulting people online without choice to save cost, will impact those most vulnerable and at risk in our communities. In the UK, 6.3% of adults (over 4 million people) have never used the internet.[8] Often, it is the most vulnerable members of society that depend on traditional, postal, transactional mail. The move to an online-only society risks leaving older people, the disabled, rural dwellers and those on low incomes disconnected.

A survey commissioned by Two Sides of European consumers[1], undertaken by Toluna in 2023 showed that;

76% believe they should have the right to choose how they receive communications (printed or digitally) from financial organisations and service providers

62% believe they should not be charged for choosing a paper bill or statement

56% are concerned with online security - that personal information held electronically is at risk of being hacked or stolen

Responsible organisations should not remove the right from consumers to choose whether they receive paper or digital communications. They should also demonstrate good Corporate Responsibility by making no surcharges or making it difficult for consumers to continue receiving paper communications.

To find out more about a consumers right to choice, please visit: **keepmeposted.org.uk**

When promoting digital communications, avoid making misleading environmental claims

Greenwashing should be avoided; it detracts from unsustainable practices and can get in the way of legitimate environmentally sound initiatives.

In a recent case addressed by Two Sides, a large travel agent claimed "By keeping it digital, you're doing your bit to help the planet" when promoting the switch from paper to digital holiday brochures. It seems ironic for a company who sells air travel to suggest that switching from paper to digital will negate the environmental impact of their business activities.

If an organisation is considering promoting the benefits of electronic communications to their customers, they should avoid misleading environmental claims that cannot be substantiated.

Two Sides welcomes the opportunity to speak with any organisation that is interested in making well-informed decisions and assuring that its environmental marketing claims are supported by the facts.

We will engage organisations to remove and desist from making misleading environmental statements. For those who refuse or are unable to provide the substantiation to justify their claims, we may continue to take further action.



Sources

1. Two Sides Trend Tracker, 2023
2. Two Sides Analysis of FAO data, 2005-2020
3. Cepi, Key Statistics, 2023
4. Eurostat, 2022
5. European Environmental Agency, EEA Greenhouse Gases – data viewer, 2024
6. UK Parliament, Energy consumption of ICT, 2022
7. The Global E-Waste Monitor, 2024
8. Office of National Statistics, 2021

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About Two Sides

Founded in 2008, Two Sides is a not-for-profit, global initiative promoting the unique sustainable and attractive attributes of print, paper and paper-based packaging.

The Two Sides campaign is a collaboration of companies from sectors including forestry, pulp and paper manufacturing, inks, pre-press, press, finishing, publishing, printing, envelopes and postal operators.

Two Sides operates throughout Europe, North America, South America, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand.

Since 2010, the Two Sides campaign has changed or removed misleading environmental claims of over 700 organisations, including many of the world's largest corporations.

For more information visit **www.twosides.info**

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Print, Paper and Paper Packaging have a great environmental story to tell

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www.twosides.info