

The Truth about Print vs. Electronic Communication

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In our industry, it seems that every day brings a new challenge for print. One of the more recent ones is a very large misperception supported by surveys that electronic forms of communication are far superior from an environmental perspective than printed forms of communication.

At the heart of this misperception is a marketing campaign called “PayItGreen” started by NACHA, The Electronic Payments Association, which started the concept that “Paper or Print Kills Trees.” The “PayItGreen” program resulted when market research conducted by NACHA found that delivering the message “Paper Kills Trees” resonated with the general public and it would be a strong motivator to get people to switch to paying their bills electronically.

As a result of the “PayItGreen” program, just about every person who receives a paper bill also receives the message that electronic bill paying is better for the environment. Unfortunately, this message has permeated and become somewhat of an urban myth that is far from accurate.

In understanding the environmental impacts of any product, one needs to examine both the upstream and downstream environmental impacts associated with a product. Understanding the true and total cost to the environment and human health are key elements embodied in sustainability, but too often these principles are not applied when it comes to the newest electronic technology.

There is no doubt that society has become more dependent upon electronic communication. The questions, from a sustainability perspective, at what cost and what cost is acceptable?

So, as you consider the message that “Paper or Print Kills Trees,” consider these facts:

- ▶ Paper comes from trees, which are a renewable resource. When properly managed, they provide both economic and ecosystem benefits. If trees were not properly managed, many would simply perish due to disease, fire, and other natural causes, and the ecosystem in which they thrive would not be preserved. According to the latest data in *The State of America's Forests*, a 2007 report by the Society of American Foresters, forested land in the U.S. has increased 49% from 1953 to 2006.
- ▶ Using paper motivates private landowners, who provide most of the pulp for papermaking, to actually plant more trees. Private landowners plant about 4 million trees every day, which is three to four times more than they harvest. This gives them the income they need to maintain, renew, and manage this valuable forest resource sustainably. Without that income, landowners face economic pressures to convert forestland to other uses, including growing other crops that are more profitable or selling the land for development (Source: International Paper—Go paper, Grow trees website).
- ▶ Electronic devices typically require the mining and refining of dozens of minerals and metals, as well as the use of plastics, hydrocarbon solvents, and other non-renewable resources. Several key metals are classified as “conflict metals,” and their use from the Congo region requires reporting to the U.S. government.
- ▶ According to the American Forest and Paper Association, paper in North America is made with about 60% renewable energy, and according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, approximately 89% of the electricity used in the U.S. comes from nonrenewable fossil fuels.

- As compared to printed products, which have a one-time carbon footprint, electronic devices, data centers, and servers require a continuous supply of electricity. According to Greenpeace, data centers are using a growing portion of the world's electricity. "If the global cloud were a country, its aggregate electricity demand would make it among the top five in the world, and many are located in areas powered by coal and other dirty sources of electricity," the environmental advocacy group says. In addition, some coal is obtained by "mountain top" removal, which decimates an ecosystem.
- Paper is one of the most recyclable materials. According to the American Forest and Paper Association, 63.5% of all paper used in North America was recovered for recycling, which makes it one of the most recyclable materials. According to the EPA, in 2008 only 13.6% of all electronic waste was recycled, and the remaining 50–80% of the waste was shipped overseas to be dismantled. The dismantling process is unsafe for workers and surrounding communities and usually involves burning the waste to recover the metals (Source: Electronics Take Back Coalition).

There are many more facts that show the importance and viability of print and that using paper made from trees sourced from a properly managed forest actually supports sound environmental stewardship. Print vs. electronic media is never a reasonable comparison, as both have some measure of environment impact. However, it is important to understand that print is both an effective and sustainable form of communication with multiple studies supporting the fact that print has a significant role in modern communication and tremendous value in providing information on many different levels.

To learn more about the effectiveness and environmental impact of printing, visit www.printing.org/valueofprint. Gary Jones can be reached at gjones@printing.org.

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