



SUSTAINABILITY »



PAPER, PACKAGING, AND PRINT: A Sustainability Story We Love to Tell



Phil Riebel
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As President of Two Sides North America, a graphic communications, industry-funded nonprofit, Phil Riebel is the first to admit that we could all use less of the resources we use, including paper. He just wants you to know the whole story. The narrative over the last two decades has been clear: going green means not using paper. But the efforts made by the paper and print industry to become more sustainable might surprise you, and the environmental impact of going digital will too.

Much of Riebel's role at Two Sides involves approaching companies and educating them about the facts and misinformation surrounding the use of paper products and print. "Corporations are trying to push consumers to go digital more each year, trying to move them all to online billing, for example," says Riebel, who has 30 years of experience working in the paper industry. "And for years there has been a very active marketing campaign around going paperless, where organizations tout the environmental benefits by saying, 'Go green, go paperless, save the planet, save trees.' But they don't always

understand the life cycle of paper and things such as sustainable forestry. At Two Sides, we approach companies, educate them, and help the graphic communications and print industry by urging the companies to remove the negative claims that are misleading."

Riebel was Vice President of Sustainability for UPM-Kymmene Group, a paper- and forest-products company in Helsinki, Finland, when Two Sides was founded in the UK in 2008. As the only organization addressing the negative environmental messaging the paper industry was feeling the brunt of, Two Sides quickly gained members in Europe first and then Australia. After returning to the United States, Riebel launched Two Sides North America in 2012 with the assistance of the National Paper Trade Association (NPTA) and its member companies. Today the organization is present in all 5 continents.

Riebel says the negative narrative around paper use stems from the fact that the industry was simply out-communicated by media and environmental groups for a long time. "We let environmentalists and the media tell a negative story about our industry early on," he says. "Now we are working to promote the benefits of paper and print. It should have been done 30 years ago, but the good news is that the positives have

changed today to include increased environmental responsibility, reduction of carbon footprints, and, of course, the increased value of print as a marketing channel."

The fact that the industry has made major advances concerning sustainability sure helps the messenger. It starts with two big topics: responsible forest management and the recyclability of paper products. Riebel says there is a strong story to tell in North America about how forests are being better managed, despite the negative imagery in the media, such as pictures of clear-cut forests.

"If we manage forests properly, we will have a sustainable resource," Riebel says. "In North America especially, we have made great strides in the area of responsible forest management. Companies have experts on staff, and we have government regulators tasked with making sure we manage forests for the long term so that they will provide not just economic return but also recreational, social, and environmental benefits."

A major boost in helping promote responsible forestry and manufacturing of paper products is the stringent certifications that have been implemented. Currently, there are three main third-party groups enforcing forestry standards globally—the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC),

the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), and the American Tree Farm System (ATFS)—endorsed by the international Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC™). All



of these organizations have published standards certifying and tracking the path of products from managed and sustainable forests through the supply chain to the end user, keeping certified material separated from noncertified material. Any company in this supply chain, including harvesters, processors, manufacturers, distributors, printers, or anyone who is taking ownership of the forest product at any stage, must be certified to be able to label or promote their products as certified. Each organization has a recognized logo that the end user can place on their printed materials, crediting the certification of the entire chain of custody—from forest management to the paper manufacturer to the print organization.

When it comes to recycling, Riebel says few products are as recyclable as paper and packaging. Still, the potential to improve is there, which is why Two Sides focuses its education on renewability and the notion of a circular economy. “We are at more than 65 percent paper recovery in the United States and 70 percent in Canada. Europe is even higher,” Riebel says. “North America is not the most sustainability-aware society, but we have made great progress, and as people further understand the benefits of paper and packaging, it will help our industry.”

In North America, Two Sides has approached 177 companies about their negative claims around the use of paper, and 117 (66 percent) have removed those claims after becoming more educated on the topic. Globally, Two Sides has worked with 360 companies who have removed claims against paper and print. Riebel says companies often learn that they are out of touch with two things: the life cycle of paper and the life cycle of electronic information.

“Usually their goal is cost reduction, but their science behind it isn’t always plausible or

accurate,” Riebel says. “The issue we have is that you need to replace paper with something else to communicate with, and is the alternative a better and more responsible choice?”

The natural assumption is that digital is a more environmentally friendly option, but that’s not always the case. For example, the manufacturing of electronic parts relies on metals from minerals with a finite supply that are, in some cases, coming from mining operations with highly negative social and environmental impacts. “There are major social issues with mines in Africa, and making a computer relies heavily on nonrenewable resources,” Riebel points out. “And most people don’t realize that when a computer or phone is recycled, it’s often being done in China or Africa in poor conditions, with impacts on the environment and human health.”

Relying on digital also puts stress on server farms, which require energy to run. In fact, data centers are one of the largest and fastest-growing consumers of electricity in the United States. “It’s a nonrenewable life cycle,” Riebel explains. “The message is always to ‘go paperless to save the planet’ and that going green means going digital. But companies are not properly considering the environmental life cycle of going digital. Everything has an impact.”

According to a study by Gartner, a leading research and technology company, the production and running of the information communications technology (ICT) sector is estimated to equate to 2 percent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, similar to that of the airline industry, and this is expected to double by 2020. Ecofys (now part of Navigant), an international energy and sustainability consultancy, says that the pulp, paper, and print industry accounts for only 1 percent of GHG emissions. For more

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on the environmental impacts of electronic communications, see the Two Sides Fact Sheets at twosidesna.org/Two-Sides-Fact-Sheet.

Paper is certainly not perfect, but the overwhelming desire to do business with responsible paper producers has driven the industry to invest in new technology that improves its environmental performance. The same is true for the print industry and equipment manufacturers. To be clear, Riebel isn’t saying that nothing can be done to further improve the print and paper industry from an environmental standpoint. In fact, he welcomes it. He just wants it to be done based on science, not marketing.

“We’ve had the last two decades to research, report, and act on the full impact our manufacturing processes have had on the environment, and the research continues,” says Riebel. “We can say with certainty that it has driven some of the strongest and most successful environmental-responsibility changes any industry has undergone in ages, and there is more to come.” ■

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