

Paperless “Green” Claims

The Facts

Many North American service providers are urging their customers to go paperless with claims that switching to electronic communication will “save trees,” is “greener” or will otherwise “protect the environment.” These “go paperless” marketing messages ignore the environmental impacts of switching to digital services and products as well as the unique sustainable features of print on paper: It comes from a renewable resource, is made using mostly renewable, carbon-neutral biomass energy, is recyclable and is recycled more than any other material in North America. Two Sides leads a campaign to challenge unsubstantiated environmental marketing claims used to promote electronic communication and encourage companies to follow best practices for environmental marketing. As a result of Two Sides ongoing educational campaign, more than 130 leading North American companies (including many in the Fortune 500) and over 700 companies globally have removed or corrected environmental claims.

Marketing claims like “go green, go paperless” and “go paperless, save trees” do not meet guidelines for environmental marketing established by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Canadian Standards Association (CSA).

FTC Green Guides, Section 260.2: Marketers must ensure that all reasonable interpretations of their claims are truthful, not misleading, and supported by a reasonable basis before they make the claims. In the context of environmental marketing claims, a reasonable basis requires competent and reliable scientific evidence. Such evidence consists of tests, analyses, research or studies that have been conducted and evaluated in an objective manner by qualified persons and are generally accepted in the profession to yield accurate and reliable results. Such evidence should be sufficient in quality and quantity based on standards generally accepted in the relevant scientific fields, when considered in light of the entire body of relevant and reliable scientific evidence, to substantiate that each of the marketing claims is true.¹

Canadian Standards Association, Environmental Claims Guide for Industry and Advertisers: CAN/CSA-ISO 14021 sets out 18 specific requirements applicable to self-declared environmental claims. Among these requirements are that claims shall be accurate and not misleading, and that claims shall be substantiated and verified.²

Claims like “going paperless saves trees” create a false impression that forests are a finite resource that is being destroyed. In fact, forests are a renewable resource that is continuously replenished using sustainable forest management practices.

Each year, forests in North America grow significantly more wood than is harvested. Between 1990 and 2020, net forest area in the United States increased by approximately 18 million acres,³ the equivalent of 1,200 NFL football fields every day. Forest area in Canada remained stable at approximately 857 million acres during the same period.³

Tree harvesting in the U.S. occurs on less than 2% of forestland per year in contrast to the nearly 3% disturbed annually by natural events like insects, disease, and fire.⁴ Harvesting occurs on 0.2% of Canada’s forestlands, while 4.5% is disturbed by insects and 0.7% is disturbed by fire.⁵

Avoiding the use of wood is not the way to protect forests for the long term.

While saving trees and protecting forests is a widely shared goal, avoiding the use of wood is not necessarily the way to get there. It is precisely the areas of the world that consume the least wood that continue to experience the greatest forest loss. Continued use of paper and other wood products may be a key factor in maintaining a forested landscape for future

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generations. This realization is reflected in today's third-party forest certification systems that aim to offer a market-based system for supporting the sustainable growth, harvesting, and consumption of forest products.⁶

The income landowners receive for trees grown on their land is an important incentive to maintain their land in forests.

Across the United States, 58% of forest land is privately owned. Of the timber harvested in the United States, 89% comes from private lands.⁴ If the market for their wood products is lost, there is little incentive for private landowners to maintain their land in forest. Far from causing deforestation, the demand for sustainably sourced paper in the U.S. promotes responsibly managed forests, which provide many environmental and social benefits.

The full impacts of converting to electronic media are often not properly considered and sometimes completely ignored.

The direct impact of information and communication technology (ICT) products and services replacing paper is far from negligible, and the trade-off between the two depends on conditions such as use frequency, source of energy, end-of-life management of the products, etc.⁷

A record 53.6 million metric tons (Mt) of electronic waste was generated in 2019, up 21% in just five years. The United States and Canada collectively generated 7.7 million metric tons of electronic waste in 2019. That's 46 lbs. per person, and nearly three times the worldwide per capita generation of 16 lbs. Small electronic equipment, screens and monitors, small IT and telecommunication equipment comprised more than half of global e-waste last year.⁸

Only 17.4% of e-waste was collected and recycled globally in 2019, with only 15% of e-waste in North America recycled. Most e-waste was either dumped or burned rather than being collected for recycling and reuse.⁸

Numerous toxic and hazardous substances are found in electronic equipment and pose severe risk to the environment and human health when not handled in an environmentally sound manner. Recent research found that unregulated e-waste is associated with increasing numbers of adverse health effects, from birth defects and altered neurodevelopment to DNA damage, adverse cardiovascular and respiratory effects and cancer.⁸

The energy consumption required for digital technologies is increasing 9% each year and the share of digital technology in global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions could double to 8% by 2025.⁹

Unsubstantiated environmental marketing claims like “go paperless, go green” are damaging to the North American economy and threaten jobs.

In fact, a total of 7.3 million jobs (4.6% of total U.S. civilian jobs) that generate \$1.58 trillion in sales revenue (4.3% of U.S. Total Output) depend on the U.S. mailing industry, which includes paper production, printing production, related suppliers, graphic design and the handling and distribution of mail.¹⁰ The forest sector employed 204,555 people in Canada in 2018 and accounted for about 1.1% of total employment in Canada. The pulp and paper product manufacturing subsector accounted for about 26% of forest sector employment.¹¹

Sources

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January 2021

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