

“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”¹.

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**. They are not specific, not supported by reliable scientific evidence, life cycle analysis, and are misleading because they imply that electronic communication always has less effect on the environment than printed materials. This contravenes advertising regulations across Australia and New Zealand.

Examples of misleading statements include:

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 damaging to an industry that employs ~258,000 people in Australia and 39,245 in New Zealand², across the paper, print, mail, and publishing industry.

Most commonly, the driving reason for this move to digital communication is cost reduction, rather than environmental initiatives.

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.

49% of consumers believe organisations promoting digital as better for the environment is really about saving cost - Toluna, 2021³.

“ 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. ”

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 aren't accurate. 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 CO₂⁴.
- In Australia and New Zealand, paper comes from managed regrowth forests or planted forests where the cycle of planting, growing, and harvesting is carefully controlled. Australia alone has two million hectares of working forests and growing, equating to over 1,000,000 MCGs in land⁵.
- Providing an organisation is sourcing its paper from responsible producers, they should not be concerned about saving trees. Indeed, quite the opposite⁶.



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Myth – Paper is wasteful and bad for the environment

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

Australia and New Zealand are global recycling leaders, with more than 87% of all paper and cardboard recovered in Australia⁷ and more than 58% in New Zealand⁸.

87% of paper and paperboard is recycled in Australia

58% of paper and paperboard is recycled in NZ

Paper making is an inherently sustainable process

Based on wood, a natural renewable material, the papermaking process is a sustainable cycle. Recycled fibres are used effectively, whilst new fibres are brought in 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. Paper and cardboard can be recycled on average 5-7 times before the fibres become too short to be reused. Of the fibre used by the Australian pulp and paper industry, 45% is supplied by recycled fibre and 55% from virgin wood fibre⁹. Oji Fibre is the single fibre recovery centre in New Zealand, and processes over 230,000 tonnes of cardboard and paper to be turned back into new packaging materials, each year¹⁰.

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 are burned for energy as a biofuel, displacing fossil fuel with reduced carbon emissions.

The pulp and paper industry sources 55% of its fibre from paper for recycling



The paper, pulp and print sectors are one of the lowest global industrial emitters of greenhouse gasses, accounting for 0.8% of emissions¹¹.



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 currently accounts for 3% of global greenhouse gas emissions and this is predicted to rise to 14% by 2040¹². Worldwide, emissions generated by emails is estimated to be 300 million tonnes of CO2 a year – equivalent to the annual emissions of 63 million cars¹³.

In comparison, the paper, pulp, and print sectors are one of the lowest industrial emitters of greenhouse gasses, accounting for 0.8% of emissions¹⁴. Paper and cardboard production has increased by 5% since 2013-14 but energy intensity has fallen more than 11%¹⁵.

The electronic waste problem is colossal, and it is growing. In 2019, a gigantic 53.6 million metric tonnes of e-waste were generated across the world¹⁶. 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.

In 2020, 539,000 tonnes of e-waste were generated in Australia, and only about half was recycled¹⁷. According to the New Zealand Environment Minister David Parker, New Zealand has an estimated e-waste recycling rate of less than two per cent¹⁸, well behind other countries. Despite being one of the highest per capita e-waste generators (19.2kg), New Zealand does not have any e-waste management policies¹⁹. 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.



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Making misleading statements contravenes advertising regulations

Organisations should be aware that misleading environmental claims contravene the principles and guidelines provided by the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission.

Green Marketing and the Australian Consumer Law guidelines by the Australian Competition & Consumer Commission outline:

- Businesses have an obligation not to engage in any conduct that is likely to mislead or deceive consumers.
- Companies should not falsely claim that their goods or services have certain capabilities or effects they do not have.
- Companies should not claim that a particular good or service has certain environmental benefits if these claims cannot be substantiated.
- Goods must comply with any description that is provided in advertising or labelling. This is especially relevant to claims regarding recyclable content or the environment impact of components used in the product, such as refrigerants.

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 ACCC 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 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. 59% of consumers say they regularly print out documents at home if they want a hard copy²⁰. When paper communication is received it may be stored, recycled, burned as a biofuel, 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 understand ISO standards for life cycle assessment (ISO 14040-14044), assessed sixteen (16) relevant indicators in five (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 option²¹.

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