

Letter to the Industry: “Don’t Print” isn’t “Going Green”

By [Gail Nickel-Kailing](#) on February 2nd, 2009

An Open Letter to the Industry, from Charlie Corr, Chief Strategist, Mimeo.com

It is increasingly popular to bash the use of paper. The industry is an easy target as everyone uses paper and the presentation of the industry is laughable (think Dunder Mifflin on The Office).

Despite the many environmentally friendly actions taken by the paper, printing and publishing industries, little is known of these efforts due to a self-inflicted inability to publicize them. Unlike the auto or fuel industries, we don’t spend any money as an industry on effective green promotion.



Think about it, paper primarily comes from trees. Trees are a renewable resource. They come from farms. You don’t see people bashing farmers, why paper? Trees improve the environment by moderating climate, improving air quality, conserving water, and harboring wildlife. According to the Department of Agriculture, one acre of forest absorbs six tons of carbon dioxide and puts out four tons of oxygen. This is enough to meet the annual needs of 18 people.

Most of us are concerned about the environment but we don’t want to change our behavior. We certainly don’t seem willing to give up our computers, PDA’s, bottled water, appliances or gas-guzzling vehicles. There isn’t a much easier way to assuage our guilt than to slap a tag line at the bottom of our e-mail urging others to do something. Here are two of the more popular ones:

Think before you print.

Please consider your environmental responsibility before printing any documents.

I have received the first most recently from a sales representative for printing equipment. I have seen a version of it used by Mimeo staff. The second comes from our travel agency. It might as well have been, “we no longer want to incur the cost of printing so we will cover it with an environmental message.” The same can be said of many financial institutions who say they want you to “go green” but really want to cut mail costs and shift the cost of printing from them, to you.

Paper Facts

Paper is made from cellulose fiber, the source of which can be pulped wood, or a variety of other materials such as rags, cotton, grasses, sugar cane, rice, or waste paper.



The first piece of paper was produced from rags in AD 105 by Ts'ai Luin in China. Today, wood pulp is the most common source material for the manufacture of virgin paper, i.e. paper which has no recycled content. Due to reforestation, forests in the US have actually grown over the past century. About one-third of the United States — 747 million acres — is covered with trees. An estimated 4 million trees are planted each day. On the nation's commercial forests, net annual growth exceeds harvests and losses to insects and disease by 47 percent each year.

Paper is Biodegradable

Unlike plastic water bottles, computers, PDA's and most electronic devices and appliances, paper decomposes in a landfill. Disposed paper is not dangerous. Compare this to cell phones, PC's and paperless reading devices like the Kindle. They contain lead, cadmium, mercury, chromium, and polyvinyl chlorides.

There are materials that have known toxicological effects that range from brain damage to kidney disease to mutations, and cancers. E-waste is the fastest-growing component of the municipal waste stream worldwide. It is estimated that we dispose of 130,000 computers every day in the United States and 100 million cell phones annually.

Plastic is not generally biodegradable. Of the 30 billion plastic water bottles sold in the United States in 2005, only 12 percent were recycled leaving 25 billion bottles landfilled, littered or incinerated. Plastic water bottles produced for U.S. consumption require the use of 1.5 million barrels of oil per year.

That much energy could power 250,000 homes or fuel 100,000 cars in that same time period. Of course, giving up our bottled water, electronic devices or gas guzzlers would require us to actually change our behavior; it is easier to suggest that others do so by slapping a tagline bashing paper and printing on our e-mail.

Paper is Recyclable

Thirty-seven percent of U.S. pulp is produced from recovered paper. The use of recycled content varies widely among grades of paper, from an average of 45 percent recycled content in tissue products to a low of 6 percent in printing and writing papers. A shift toward higher recycled contents in printing and writing grades would significantly lessen the environmental impacts of the paper industry as this segment accounts for 27 percent of U.S. paper production.

In 2007, total paper recovery averaged nearly 360 pounds for each man, woman, and child in America. By 2012, the paper industry plans to recover 60 percent of the paper Americans consume. Most recovered paper is recycled back into paper and paperboard products.

For example, old corrugated boxes are used to make new recycled corrugated boxes, recovered printing and writing paper is used to make new recycled copy paper and recovered paper can be used in a variety of other products as well such egg cartons, fruit trays, wall insulation, roofing, and animal bedding.

Paper is Critical to the Economy

The forest products industry accounts for approximately 6 percent of the total U.S. manufacturing output, employs more than one million people, and ranks among the top 10 manufacturing employers in 42 states with an estimated payroll exceeding \$50 billion.

Paper is the carrier of most of what is printed and published. The estimated value of shipped printed products in the US was \$393 billion in 2007. There are almost 175,000 establishments in this segment and they employ 2.9 million. To put this in perspective, employment in auto manufacturing is around 1.2 million.

Paper, Printing & Publishing Environmental Achievements

Paper manufacturers have become much more environmentally friendly. From water to air pollution, reducing the use of dangerous chemicals and improving energy efficiency, paper manufacturers' have improved dramatically.

The industry has undertaken a number of sustainable forestry initiatives. Associations such as SFI (Sustainable Forestry Initiative) and FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) work on insuring sustainable, environmentally sound forestry practices. The estimated value of FSC labeled paper is over 20 billion USD. Paper manufacturers have also introduced a range of recycled and certified sheets.



Fortune Magazine recently rated International Paper at the top of its Social Responsibility list with Weyerhaeuser also in the top 10. Printing equipment providers have undertaken a number of initiatives to improve our environment from recycling toner cartridges to reusing components to deploying more energy efficient devices.



Many print providers have attained chain of custody certifications and offer a wide range of recycled papers. Most recycle all paperwaste and many offer related recycled products such as 3-Ring binders made from recycled material. The Print On Demand business model eliminates waste due to obsolescence and the digital printing process is environmentally friendly.

Paper is Efficient

Not only is paper an environmentally friendly carrier of information but it has an intimacy

interaction. Paper lasts with limited backward compatibility issues. Reading from paper is 20% to 30% faster than reading from a screen. Viewing on a screen, results in lower accuracy for tasks such as proofreading and causes more eye fatigue.

Evidence suggests that comprehension is higher and that ability to read and annotate, to navigate quickly and to facilitate spatial layout favors paper over viewing. Reading results in a deeper understanding of text, a better sense of structure, and making it easier to interleave reading and writing as it combines tactile and visual learning.

There is an end-user preference for print that is related to flexibility, culture, and ease of use. This preference increases with high quality typography and print and is not age specific.

A Call to Action

All of us can do more to help the environment. As citizens of planet earth we should all recycle and reuse whatever we can. We should do whatever we can to improve our personal environmental footprint. That doesn't mean we should stop printing.

The paper, printing and publishing industry needs to more effectively convey the fact that **we embrace the green movement and that not printing isn't going green. While the industry is fragmented, we must find ways to work together to get this message effectively conveyed or we will all suffer.**

Print providers must demand that our vendors and associations accomplish more in this area and we must be willing to support these initiatives with our time and money.

Specific Action Items:

The paper industry should be more proactive about its actions and it should work at reducing the cost of recycled papers. They should spend money to effectively market the value of paper and the environmental actions that they have taken. Let's see trees, farmers and a credible spokesperson on mass media.

As an industry we need to effectively educate any vendor or employee who thoughtlessly adds an anti-printing message to its messaging. We have stopped it at Mimeo, and after we objected to the messaging the printing salesperson and the travel agency changed policy. Be proactive!

As an industry we should all "eat our own dog food." If we believe paper based communications are viable and add value, we should use them. If we think they are not necessary, or too expensive, that is what our clients will also think.

If we are giving a presentation it should be printed and distributed. We should use print to promote our products and services. If you attend any event given by, or for, the industry and this doesn't happen voice your complaint.