Understand it

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Topic-based guidance

See examples

Eco labels

What key issues exist for my business?

An 'eco-label' like 'Fairtrade' or 'FSC' (Forest Stewardship Council) is used to mark a product out as environmentally aware and can provide a USP, attracting specific demographics and a potential mark-up. There are now over 377 eco-labels in 211 countries in 25 industry sectors. Some manufacturers have decided to create an in-house eco-label, and some of these are independently assessed. Several approaches from different manufacturers can be found, resulting in numerous eco-labels. Making the decision to use (or not) an eco-label is not an easy one. Much of this proliferation has been driven by the difficulty in finding the right balance between making standards easy enough to achieve via Business As Usual 'plus a bit of green' (so the standard is widely adopted) or making standards that have worthy values but which few companies can agree to or invest in.

Why is this an issue for my business?

Many eco-labels however are becoming meaningless by their proliferation with an increase in marketing 'green-spin' to boost eco-claims. The outcome is consumer 'eco-fatigue', with the over-selling of sound environmental intentions leading to consumer mistrust. True sustainability is too complex to be explained by a single product benefit or green label.

What steps can I take to address this?

- SustainAbility has produced a report 'Signed, Sealed … Delivered?', which considers how companies and brands are struggling with the question of how to mobilise consumers to give preference to products and brands that have the potential to deliver positive social and environmental outcomes. "*Bold sustainability commitments by brands demand credible ways to evaluate the progress of their value chains*", the report says. It's easy, yet false, to make one thing better by making something else worse, and then report the thing that you make as 'better'. When reviewing an eco-claim, it is important to look beyond the green spin and consider: Who issued the accreditation, and is there any conflict of interest in their motivation for doing so?

- Does the claim cover all the impacts from raw materials extraction to landfill or recycling plant?

- Is the headline claim traceable to the source data that supports it?

Making use of the DOT Toolkit can help identify some of these issues and hot spots, to enable you to focus on areas that will have the greatest impact, and reap the best environmental credentials. From this standpoint, one can then make a more informed decision on the use (or not) of an eco-label.

Eco-efficient purists would argue that no eco-label should be required, as the design and use will speak for itself.

Further reading

- The EcoLabel Index (a 5 user license costs $99/month).

- Full product transparency, an e-book by Ramon Arratia.

- SustainAbility Report, Signed, Sealed...Delivered? March 2011.

- The Electronic Product Environmental Assessment Tool (EPEAT) based in the US.

- The Co-operative Bank's tenth annual report into green spending 'Ten Years of Ethical Consumerism: 1999-2008'.

- [Boston Consulting Group report : 'Capturing the Green Advantage for Consumer Companies'. January 2009.](#)
- [DataMonitor report 'Green Consumer Attitudes: Telecommunications'](#). December 2010.

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