

An introduction to responsible purchasing

OVER THE PAST 30 years, responsible purchasing has been maturing on the fringes of the professional purchasing world. Within the last three to five years, however, responsible purchasing practices have become mainstream solutions, promoted by a wealth of professional organizations and government entities. Proponents include the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing, National Association of State Purchasing Officials, Institute for Supply Management and government purchasers at the federal, state and local levels.

Professional purchasers have continually sought to balance potentially competing purchasing goals such as price, quality and availability. Responsible purchasing increases the number of factors that must be considered by expanding the definition of quality to include human-health, environmental and social considerations. The underlying premise is that every purchase has hidden considerations that affect human health, the environment and society.

As more executives understand the connection between broader social issues and purchasing decisions, they are adopting responsible purchasing strategies designed to reduce the adverse impacts of their organization's purchasing decisions. In turn, professional purchasers are increasingly being asked to specify "green" products and services.

Getting started: The basics

Purchasers looking for ways to implement responsible purchasing can embrace any of the following strategies:

Recycled content and other factors. While recycled-content products were emphasized when the green purchasing movement began in the 1970s, green purchasing has expanded well-beyond its original exclusive focus on recycled content. Recycled-content percentages remain an important environmental indicator,

but they are now recognized as only one of many environmental factors.

Purchasers today are looking at multiple environmental impacts from every phase of a product's life cycle – meaning the environmental effects of the raw materials used to make a product, the process used to make and ship them, the impacts of the products themselves and the final impacts when the product is no longer needed.

Federal agencies and many state and local governments are required to buy recycled-content products meeting the recycled-content recommendations published by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. EPA's Comprehensive Procurement Guidelines identify more than 50 categories of products that can contain recycled-content materials. For each category, EPA recommends both total recycled content and postconsumer recycled-content percentages.

Total recycled content defines the total volume of recycled materials in a product. Total recycled content includes both preconsumer (or postindustrial) recycled content and postconsumer recycled content. Preconsumer recycled content includes materials traditionally recovered from the manufacturing process that are reprocessed and used to make new products. Postconsumer recycled content refers to materials that were collected from the recycling bins found in office buildings and neighborhoods throughout the nation.

The EPA and most purchasers emphasize postconsumer recycled content over total recycled content. Many environmental standards incorporate recycled content requirements along with other important environmental considerations as part of their multi-attribute standards.

Buy energy-efficient products. If a product has a plug, it is likely that the U.S. Energy Star program has a standard to determine whether

the product is energy-efficient or not. The program maintains almost 60 energy-efficiency standards covering a broad range of products routinely purchased by governments, other large organizations and individual consumers. Energy Star, for example, includes standards for products such as lighting (including traffic lights), computers, copiers and other business machines, as well as heating, ventilation and air conditioning equipment.

Energy-efficient products reduce operational costs, reduce electricity consumption and lower the volume of global warming pollution. Purchasers routinely require products to meet the relevant Energy Star standard.

Buy green cleaning products.

One out of three cleaning products contains ingredients that are known to cause human-health or environmental problems. Concerned with the potential threat to school children, government employees and citizens, many governments are requiring products to meet rigorous human-health and environmental criteria. New York state, for example, requires products to be certified by the EcoLogo or Green Seal programs. Illinois recently passed a similar ordinance that references EcoLogo- and Green Seal-certified cleaning products, along with products formulated in partnership with EPA's Design for the Environment program. Today, green cleaning products work just as well if not better than traditional products, without additional costs.

Buy green office equipment.

Computers, copiers, scanners and other office equipment have significant environmental impacts throughout their life cycles. The raw materials used to make the products are hazardous. The processes used to make the products are energy- and water-intensive; they generate large volumes of hazardous waste. These products consume significant quantities of energy and create additional environmental hazards at the end of their useful lives when they must be carefully recycled.

Last year President George W. Bush required all computer products purchased by the federal government

to meet the EPEAT IEEE 1680 green computer standard. Many state and local governments have followed the federal government's lead.

The EPEAT green computer standard includes 23 mandatory environmental criteria and dozens of additional optional criteria. Manufacturers identify products meeting the standard on the EPEAT Web site.

The EcoLogo program has similar standards for printers, scanners, copiers and other office equipment. In all, more than 1,000 office products are EcoLogo certified.

Both EPEAT and EcoLogo standards include a product's ability to meet Energy Star requirements. Both programs, however, go well beyond Energy Star's singular focus on energy efficiency to include multiple additional environmental considerations. To ensure greener electronic purchases, look for EPEAT-registered or EcoLogo-certified products.

Buy environmentally preferable papers. Making paper is one of the most energy- and water-intensive industries and one of the largest consumers of forest products. Environmental experts estimate that each ton of virgin (nonrecycled) paper requires 98 tons of resources to manufacture. Luckily, there are a variety of high-quality and affordable environmentally preferable papers available that significantly reduce those impacts.

While environmentally preferable papers suffered from poor performance and quality issues in the 1980s, they are now almost indistinguishable from their virgin counterparts. Purchasers routinely require papers containing postconsumer recycled content while prohibiting any materials from endangered forest systems and requiring that paper be made in mills that do not use chlorine or chlorine derivatives.

Many purchasers are able to buy environmentally preferable paper products without increasing costs. In areas of the country where there is a price difference, organizations are using double-sided printers and copiers or modern tissue dispensers that reduce paper use to offset the additional paper costs.

Proof of environmental claims. The number of products making "green" claims is skyrocketing. As several recent studies have concluded,

the value of many environmental claims being made by manufacturers is suspect.

Increased purchaser scrutiny has forced some manufacturers to restate or clarify some of their environmental claims. To reduce the likelihood of being misled, purchasers are requesting third-party certification of environmental claims, which means an outside, independent auditor has verified them. Other purchasers are accepting documentation provided by the manufacturer to substantiate claims. Such documentation includes copies of test results and affidavits signed by senior company officials.

Review environmental standards. Credible environmental standards exist for many products sourced by government purchasing officials. Because the credibility of an environmental standard can be difficult to determine, look for standards that have been developed in an open, public and transparent process, such as those developed in accordance with International Organization for Standardization or American National Standards Institute procedures.

When evaluating an environmental standard, be sure to understand who developed the standard to determine if there are any conflicts of interest. Some standards developed by individual companies or trade associations, for example, tend to be less comprehensive or less demanding than standards developed by outside parties.

The most respected standards focus on multiple environmental considerations. They do not focus on any one environmental issue, such as recycled content or energy efficiency. Instead, the standards attempt to balance multiple environmental considerations gathered throughout every phase of the product's life cycle.

About the author

Scot Case has been researching and promoting responsible purchasing issues for 15 years. He is vice president of TerraChoice Environmental Marketing Inc., which manages the EcoLogo program to identify more environmentally preferable products. Reach him at scase@terrachoice.com or at 610/779-3770.

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