

The Beast that is the European Union's Eco-Label

Introduced on the 16th August 2012, the European Union EcoLabel is a voluntary scheme designed so that consumers can identify products and services that have a reduced environmental impact. The EcoLabel is based on life cycle analysis and is increasingly appearing on products. Most visible are textiles, many of them from India produced for European distribution and sale, and floor coverings. Other goods sporting the EU EcoLabel include paints and varnishes and a host of copying papers, which is of interest to the graphic arts.

Fortunately for printers and print media buyers Intergraf, the international industry association of print associations, has been much involved in the development of the EU EcoLabel. Intergraf recognised early on that this label would see the light of day and has participated in its development in order to ensure that the interests of the print industry are reflected in its requirements. Given Intergraf's global reach, this is good news since the EU EcoLabel's requirements for print media reflects the interests of printers and print buyers worldwide, not just in Europe.

Slow & Steady

Discussions around the EcoLabel initiative started in 2003 however, the project has its origins in work dating back to 1992. The original project was designed to establish a voluntary labelling scheme for the European Community that was "intended to promote products with a reduced environmental impact during their entire life cycle and to provide consumers with accurate, non-deceptive and scientifically based information on the environmental impact of products".

It was clear during early implementations that determining the criteria on which to base the label was fundamental to its success, so it was time for a rethink in

order to come up with a scheme that would be acceptable to all parties. Intergraf, as one of several industry bodies and NGOs cooperating with the EU to develop criteria that are right for different product categories, has played a central role in these conversations.

The only categories in the graphic arts industry for which compliance criteria have been set is paper: newsprint, copy and graphic paper, tissue paper and printed papers. According to Laetitia Reynaud, policy advisor for Intergraf: "The industry in general pointed to the complexity of printed products and the need to ensure that printing companies are able to produce their whole range of printed products". Given the massive range of print media products it was almost impossible

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to come up with a common scheme that everyone could accept. Reynaud explained: "Due to a lack of agreement between stakeholders, the adoption process was blocked in 2008". Fortunately EU bureaucrats are a dogged breed and the Commission relaunched discussions in 2011.

Those discussions were characterised by scepticism and doubt as to how the label would develop, particularly for the printing sector. The central concern was the basis on which a product would be evaluated, so Intergraf has played an active part in determining the base criteria. However, to say that the criteria are stringent is a bit of an understatement and as things stand, it is clear that only a few very large printing companies working with very large brands will choose to implement them.

Getting Labelled

So far only a few paper companies have been awarded the EU EcoLabel. But this doesn't mean the label is irrelevant:

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the European Commission’s objective was to come up with an extremely high environmental standard, even if only a limited number of companies could achieve it. It is worth remembering that EU environmental policy is designed to change behaviour in supply chains.

Intergraf was especially keen to make sure that the label would be relevant across printed product sectors. According to Reynaud: “The application for the EU Ecolabel is costly and is extremely burdensome, so it was key for Intergraf to ensure that the user manual explains how a single application can be valid for more than one printed product (http://ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel/documents/usermanual_paper.pdf). The Commission agreed that the approach proposed by Intergraf would appear in the user manual.”

This is a big achievement and sets a sound precedent for Intergraf’s future involvement in the development of European environmental initiatives. The user manual is an important supplement that will aid applicants in fulfilling the ten criteria set for each product group in order to achieve compliance. The criteria vary from group to group but for papers and printed papers they relate to emissions from the premises and equipment, substrates and recyclability. A printer who wants to get this label must work with a “competent body” (presumably some sort of certification company) and

submit a complete profile of activities. This includes: declarations of emissions to water and air; energy use (excluding transport); forest management; waste management; test results proving the recyclability of products and information about the environmental impact of suppliers and fitness for use.

This all sounds pretty arduous but several large paper companies such as Stora Enso, Mondi, Lenzing Paper and UPM Kymmene are already certified for selected paper products. Uptake will, of course, vary from one European member state to another according to local interest, tax incentives and so on. Reynaud says that “some member states already intend to give a reduced taxation for EU EcoLabelled products, which will have an impact on the demand. Most of our members intend

to communicate on the label and leave it up to companies to decide whether they want to apply for certain of their products.”

This is a wise course of action and one that should be actively promoted by all print industry associations. Some Intergraf members are already working towards compliance however, for the most part these are larger printing companies. Intergraf is working on a Question & Answers

document for its members, which ideally will also be distributed by local industry associations. As Intergraf secretary general Beatrice Klose has said: “European printers are keen to demonstrate their efforts to secure excellent environmental performance. However, excellence should not mean inaccessibility.”

The EU EcoLabel is a multi-criteria label designed specifically in the interests of consumers. Getting the



How far would you trust claims from the Bean Trust?

label requires certification and periodic compliance checks by independent auditors. It overlaps with ISO 16759 (Communicating and calculating the carbon footprint of print media) to some extent but not by much. A fundamental principle of the ISO standard is not to provide an eco label for print media products, on the basis that labels need to be transparent and universally recognised to be meaningful. And ISO 16759 only deals with a single environment impact: carbon footprint.

With a rising number of papers now compliant with the EcoLabel we consider it to be increasingly relevant for the printing industry, because at some point the label will start impacting print media products, for instance when big brand print buyers require EU EcoLabel compliant substrates and printing. Although the EU EcoLabel is currently voluntary, regulation should not be ruled out for the future. Depending on one's perspective, the EU EcoLabel is something to be embraced or rejected. If the industry follows the latter course, it does so at its peril. We must at least be aware of its requirements and be engaged in its deployment.

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