

fuel.

Printing and design tips and tricks
September 2010

Recycled, FSC, post-consumer or post-industrial?

A little word on the many faces of paper recycling

Over the last couple of years recycled paper has become mainstream very fast. Gone are the days when recycled paper equalled a greyish outlook and a higher price. Nowadays almost every paper type is available in a partly or completely recycled version and the price is comparable to the price of non-recycled paper.

In this evolution towards more sustainable printing methods Europa is clearly leading the way. The European Commission set an overall target for 2010 at 66% recycled paper, all applications considered, a target which will most likely be met. In comparison: in the US the paper recycling rate is below 50%. Many institutions, governments, international organisations and associations have drafted detailed guidelines for the use of recycled paper in their communication.

In spite of all this good news, paper recycling still suffers from a couple of misunderstandings. Those misunderstandings lead to confusion and wrong expectations and –ultimately– tend to undermine the well-meant commitments organisations made. Time to shed some light on some FAQs on paper recycling, we thought. Rather than trying to explain certification schemes and paper types, we will start with a couple of basic facts, common questions we get from our clients and practical recommendations on the use of recycled paper.

What is the most environmentally sound paper type?

The top: 100% recycled paper

Number 1 is of course 100% recycled paper, because it does not contain any new wood pulp, hence no trees have to be felled to produce it. That at least is a very clear guideline. But within 100% recycled paper there is still a difference in the extent to which it is post-consumer or pre-consumer. Post-consumer practically means: old newspaper, office thrash, etc. made into new paper. This is of course the most recycled you can have. Pre-consumer means paper thrash made during production (hence also called post-industrial), for instance the left-overs after cutting a brochure. Post-consumer is considered as being slightly more environmentally sound than pre-consumer since it is at the very end of the consumer-chain. Practically: the more your 100% recycled paper consists of post-consumer fibre, the better. Different certification schemes testify to the environmental merits of different paper types. They do not only look into the origin of the fibre, but also into the use of energy, water, CO₂-emissions, etc.

More info?

Der Blaue Engel

www.blauer-engel.de

Nordic Swan

www.nordic-ecolabel.org

The European eco-label

ec.europa.eu/environment/ecolabel/

New woodpulp needed: partially recycled paper

If 100% recycled paper is the best from an environmental perspective, why is it not used all the time and for all purposes? One main reason: lifetime of fibre. Fibre cannot be recycled endlessly. After every recycling step, paper fibre gets shorter and weaker, resulting in weaker paper. Therefore, the paper mountain needs to be fed constantly with new woodpulp in order to keep the fibres healthy. But of course this feeding can be a harsh diet of new fibre, instead of the constant stream of new fibre as it was practised in the past. If new pulp is necessary for healthy fibre from an overall perspective, then this is also true on a micro-level. Paper which is for instance 50% recycled post-consumer and 50% non-recycled (=with new woodpulp added) has a longer lifetime and is generally stronger than 100% recycled. Now for most (institutional) communication purposes this longevity argument is not very important.

New woodpulp, but where from? Check the label

New woodpulp remains to a certain extent a technical necessity in the paper industry. That does not have to be a disaster. Much depends where the pulp and the wood come from. FSC is one of the labels giving the answer. FSC stands for Forest Stewardship Council and assures that the pulp comes from forests which are managed in a sustainable way. Think of plantations instead of rainforest, reforestation measures, some degree of biodiversity protection, etc. The international FSC-organisation is the impartial controlling body of all FSC-affiliates. There are also other labels, roughly doing the same, such as PEFC.

Take a look at:
www.fsc.org and
www.pefc.org

A big *don't*

Admittedly, not every paper type exists in 100% recycled version, let alone in a 100% recycled post-consumer version. But it is safe to say that every paper type does exist in an at least partially recycled version. It is equally safe to assume that paper for which your printer or supplier does not give any detail is not recycled and comes mainly from new woodpulp, probably from an unmonitored origin. This is nowadays a completely irresponsible choice, taking into account the great choice in recycled paper and its competitive price.

So: use as much recycled paper as possible. And if the paper has to contain new woodpulp, always ask for a certified paper type.

Does recycled have to look recycled?

In brief: no. In the past, recycled paper equalled a greyish newspaper-like look & feel. But those times are long gone. Nowadays partially recycled paper can be as white and sleek as non-recycled. It is true however that 100% recycled paper often continues to have a slightly greyer appearance, sometimes even with visible fibres. But this effect is sometimes wanted by clients since it underscores the environmental merits of the paper.

Fear for bad looks is certainly not a good argument against recycled paper anymore. The choice is wide enough to find a paper type that suits most, if not all, common needs in institutional communication.

What does it cost to be green?

The same as being any other colour. Since the expansion of the choice in paper types, fear for exploding budgets is certainly out of place when it comes to making the choice between recycled or non-recycled. More supply and wider markets mean lower prices. It is of course very important to work with a printer who is used to working a lot with recycled paper. They can order larger quantities and offer better prices. Roughly speaking, common 100% recycled post-consumer paper is sold for only marginally more than non-recycled paper of a similar quality. If you know that the price of paper is in turn only a percentage of the printing price, the difference becomes almost insignificant. But then you don't have to mind the slightly recycled look! If you do mind and you want paper white and bright as sunlight, then you can still opt for (partially) recycled paper with FSC-mark. In those cases count on an additional 10 or 15% of the overall printing price. But don't forget that the printing price is again only a fraction of the overall publications cost! Practically speaking, extra costs of recycled compared to non-recycled, may persist but are very limited.

How to stop eco-cheating?

But suppose working in an environmental way is important for you and you need a very white, classy paper without any trace of a recycled look. This steers you towards the more expensive partially recycled papers with FSC-certification. But how do you know the printer is not offering you similarly looking paper from a non-recycled source? A good start is to ask for official paper samples to compare with the finished products. That may not be enough. A solid solution lies in the fact that not only timber companies and paper producers can obtain FSC-certification, but also printers can be part of the certification scheme. That increases trust and filters away a lot of often unnecessary suspicion. On top of the visual control of the finished product, fuel.bvba/spri works exclusively with printers who obtained at least the FSC-certification. This ensures that the printers are regularly controlled by the certification organisations in their use of paper which in practice is a good safeguard against any temptation of cheating or freeriding and more generally shows that the printer takes sustainable production seriously.

Do you have more questions about recycled paper, or other questions about environmentally aware publishing? Or you are looking for paper samples for a specific publishing project or for your visual identity? Send an e-mail to christoph@fueldesign.be