

Environmental Insights

Paper vs Digital



THE CONSUMER'S
RIGHT TO CHOOSE

IS GOING PAPERLESS REALLY BETTER FOR THE ENVIRONMENT?

We have all received statements from banks, telecommunication companies and other service providers that claim the reason they want customers to go paperless is to help the environment. 'Go paperless, help the environment and save trees' is a common message that confronts consumers with a false dilemma as it implies that opting to receive paper correspondence is more harmful for the environment. These claims are misleading and unsubstantiated. Digital media has a significant environmental impact that many eco-conscious consumers may not be aware of.

DIGITAL MEDIA DOESN'T GROW ON TREES

There is more to digital than meets the eye. While paper is all around us and piles up in plain sight, the energy consumed in the manufacture of digital products, energy needed to power them and the toxic e-waste associated with their end-of-life, are largely out of sight and out of mind.

In order for consumers to make informed and responsible choices it is important to be critical of claims that digital is greener than paper correspondence. By comparing their lifecycles, consumers can decide for themselves, instead of being made to feel guilty by the torrent of greenwashing claims that are being used by many major Australian corporations.

- Producing and sending a paper statement creates on average 28.37g of CO². An email with a 1mb attachment takes 19g of CO² to send alone. However, if the email is saved, forwarded, downloaded or printed this amount becomes considerably more.
- People often compare the entire footprint of paper with only the energy it takes to send or receive digital communication. However, they forget about the data centres, networks and the resources (like non-renewable metals and fossil fuels) it takes to complete the exchange.
- Storing emails and attachments on a server may be convenient, but it takes an environmental toll. The longer the email is retained, the greater its impact on the climate.

- Paper is made from wood, a fully renewable and sustainable resource. 95% of Australian households recycle or re-use their paper products. In comparison, only 11.3% of Australian e-waste was recycled in 2014.
- The average Australian generates nearly 20kg of e-waste every year which is why electronic waste is growing at over 3 times the rate of other municipal waste streams.
- Forestry is the only carbon positive sector in Australia's economy, removing net 43.7 million tonnes of CO² from the atmosphere. Whereas, data centres alone account for 2% of the total global greenhouse gas emissions and is set to treble in the next decade.
- A typical year of incoming emails for a business user, including sending, filtering and reading, creates a carbon footprint of around 135Kg.
- Over the past 20 years the Australian printing industry has reduced its carbon footprint by 97% and now has the lowest environmental footprint of any major industry sector.

Sources

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