Good stuff??—Glossary of Consumption Terms

Ecolabeling

How can you tell if a product is environmentally preferable? Increasingly, manufacturers are relying on seals or logos called ecolabels to indicate that a product has met a specified set of environmental or social standards. Although ecolabeling schemes vary widely, they typically reward a product for its environmental soundness during one or more stages of its life cycle including production, packaging, use, or disposal. Examples of common ecolabels include: *organic* and *fair trade* for foods, *zero-VOC* for paints and varnishes, *sweatshop-free* for clothing, *biodegradable* and *phosphate-free* for cleaners, and *low-emissions* for cars.
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Extended Producer Responsibility

For most manufacturers, responsibility for a product ends when a person buys it and brings it home. A warranty might cover the cost of repairs and replacement, but even warranties end sometime. By the time the product is worn out and thrown away, the manufacturer has no connection to it whatsoever. This lack of responsibility is one reason manufacturers don't typically design products to be easily repaired, recycled, refurbished, upgraded, and reused.

Increasingly, however, many governments are adopting “extended producer responsibility” (EPR) laws that require companies to take back and assume responsibility for disposal of products they sell, from TVs to toaster ovens. The goal of EPR is to induce manufacturers to assess the full life cycle impacts of their products. Ideally, they will then eliminate unnecessary parts, forgo unneeded packaging, and design products that can easily be disassembled, recycled, remanufactured, or reused. EPR laws also typically ban the landfilling and incineration of products, establish minimum reuse and recycling requirements, specify whether producers are to be individually or collectively responsible for returned products, and stipulate whether producers may charge a fee when they take back products.
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Fair Trade

Given the economics of global trade, the individuals who actually make the products we buy—from farmers in Colombia who grow coffee to seamstresses in Malaysia who sew t-shirts—often receive only a tiny share of the final price paid for that product. Consider a cup of coffee. Of the $3 that an American might pay for a grand latte at a local coffee shop, the farmer who grows that coffee may receive pennies for the beans that went into the coffee.

Enter the fair trade movement. Fair trade arrangements guarantee that the price producers ultimately receive for their commodities is a certain percentage higher than the price on the world market. This “fair” price not only covers their production costs and assures a decent living, but also carries a range of other social and environmental standards, from the right to organize in unions to certain basic safety requirements.
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Green Procurement

When an organization “greens” its procurement, it shifts its purchasing dollars away from goods and services that cause environmental and social harm, and toward products that are more environmentally sound and socially just. These include products that conserve energy and

resources, generate less waste and pollution, and are less toxic to human and environmental health.

Green procurement can play an important role in building markets for environmentally preferable goods and services. If consumers increasingly seek out products and services that are more beneficial to the environment, producers will have a greater incentive to design and produce them. As markets for these items grow, propelled by the forces of competition and innovation, the resulting economies of scale will eventually drive down prices, making greener purchases more affordable for everyone.
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Product Life Cycle

Each day, we use hundreds of products, from paper and clothing to cell phones and compact discs. What are these products made of, and where do their parts come from? What happens to them when we're finished with them? By looking at a product's life cycle—from the extraction and processing of raw materials, to manufacturing and distribution, to the product's final use by consumers, recyclers, and disposers—we can better understand the connections between Earth's resources, energy use, waste, and wider environmental challenges like climate change. We can learn how to reduce the environmental impacts and natural resource use associated with everyday products, and learn to make better environmental choices.
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Product Take-Back

Product take-back is a form of extended producer responsibility that requires companies to take back their products after the consumer is ready to replace them or throw them away. The approach started in Europe and quickly spread to the rest of the world and to a growing range of products and industries, including consumer electronics and electric appliances, office machinery, cars, tires, furniture, paper goods, batteries, and construction materials. Today, more than 30 countries—from Brazil and China, to Poland and South Korea—have laws requiring companies to take back the packaging materials associated with their products, and over 15 nations have similar laws requiring manufacturers to take back spent batteries.
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Zero Waste

Today, factories churn out most products in what you might call a “cradle-to-grave“ fashion. Raw materials are extracted and processed, and the substances not directly useful to a factory become unwanted waste, polluting the air, rivers, and landscape. An alternative “cradle-to-cradle” system seeks to build integrated, closed-loop systems, in which the byproducts of one factory become the feedstock of another, instead of becoming environmental time bombs. Just as in the natural world, where one organism's “waste” cycles through an ecosystem to provide nourishment for other living things, the goal—and the result—is zero waste.

One of the better known “zero waste” success stories comes from Kalundborg, Denmark, where an increasingly dense web of symbiotic relationships among a number of local companies has been woven slowly over the past three decades, yielding both economic and environmental gains. Natural gas previously flared off by Denmark's largest refinery is being used as feedstock in a plasterboard factory; desulfurized fly-ash from a coal-fired power plant (also the country's largest) goes to a cement manufacturer; and sludge containing nitrogen and phosphorus from a pharmaceutical plant is used as fertilizer by nearby farms.