

The LSA's 'Guide to Purchasing Sustainable Office Supplies' was kindly produced by Adam Huttly. Adam founded Red-Inc in 2008 with an ambition to create an office supplies company which was truly ethical and sustainable, but did not compromise on providing an exceptional service in order to meet this goal. Red-Inc was the first UK office supplies company to certify as a B Corps in 2017 and – conveniently for LSA members – also features in the LSA Green Suppliers Directory. To find out more, please contact Adam at adam@red-inc.com.

Introduction

Office supplies aren't often given a second thought; however, they're a highly visible area for sustainable procurement as employees, clients, visitors and suppliers can immediately identify when tangible efforts have been made to improve an organisations sustainability performance. Looking to procure sustainable office supplies should be no different to any other sustainable procurement process: it might be as simple as purchasing renewable energy or recycled office paper. Either way 'green' products and services should involve looking at the bigger picture and consider the impact of the whole service, or the lifetime impact of a product from cradle to grave. Some 'green' products may have higher upfront costs, but they will come with many additional (often non-economic) benefits. Consideration should be given to: the ethos of the company, the products they sell, how they provide their services and how accountable they are to the sustainable goals they have set themselves. As we emerge from these challenging times, now is the chance to wipe the slate clean and set up new guidelines in your procurement strategy.

The Company

Look beyond the name. Just because a company calls itself 'green' or 'eco' doesn't make it so! Truly 'green' companies apply sustainable practices at every decision point throughout their operations. Being carbon neutral and offsetting emissions is a commendable start, but it doesn't mean anything unless firms are using it as a stepping stone to becoming a Net Zero businesses. Selling file dividers made from recycled paper is great – but if they're delivered in plastic wrap in single use boxes, the environmental benefits are significantly reduced. Watch out for vague and ambiguous language when reading about their sustainability propositions. If there aren't the facts to back up their claims, then ask questions about what exactly they are doing in these areas.

Evidence points can include:

- The "about us" page on their website should refer to their sustainability activities, going beyond talking about "eco" products.
- Are they a living wage employer?
- Case studies showing how they operate.
- Blog posts are a great resource to see a company's expertise on a variety of topics.
- Accreditations (more on this later).
- Statistics from sustainability reporting metrics.
- Clear evidence of action, scientific targets and clearly identifiable reduction figures.

Products

When talking about products, you need to look at the whole picture. ‘Green’ products or services should utilise fewer resources, be designed to last for longer, and be delivered and created in a way that minimises their impact on the environment from cradle to grave. Factors to consider include:

- Where are the products made?
- What materials are used to make the products? Examples include:
 - Eco materials – like bamboo
 - Recycled¹ materials
 - Biodegradable²
- Are they made from recyclable* materials?
- Are the materials from sustainable sources – like FSC certified paper?

Paper is undoubtedly a major component and impact of office supplies and a sustainable supplier shouldn’t want you to buy paper. However, if you need to buy it, they should offer the most environmentally friendly options they can. Did you know that the production of some recycled paper uses 72% less electricity and 83% less water in its manufacture? (And of course 100% less trees than standard paper!) When you consider that in a normal year one office employee consumes an average of 10,000 sheets of paper, the benefits of changing to recycled paper quickly add up! Major impact reductions can be achieved from changing your products from mainstream to more environmentally friendly alternatives, but is that enough? What you really want is a company that looks beyond products and uses their services to help reduce the impacts and carbon footprint of their customers as well.

Service

Great services should be the foundation of any sustainable supplier. The benefits of working with a truly sustainable office supplies company are broad, but the key point is to find one which can help you to achieve your own sustainability goals with minimum of fuss. A key environmental impact of office supplies is delivery. If companies offset their deliveries, what else are they doing to reduce their emissions? There’s no point offsetting your deliveries if they’re committing to multiple deliveries to ensure next-day fulfilment. Look out for companies who have broken out of the traditional supply and demand models into ones which reflect more innovative and resource saving thinking; consider choosing a supplier who offers 100% order fulfilment to eliminate wasteful second drops to keep the real costs (both economic and environmental) to a minimum.

Questions to ask about value-added sustainable services include:

- Do they provide sustainability reporting metrics that can help feed into your own sustainability reporting systems?
- Do they provide support on how to reduce your office supplies usage? It seems counter-intuitive but if an office supplies company really are thinking “green” they will educate and encourage customers to reduce wherever possible.
- Do they provide verifiable offsetting?
- How have they reduced their delivery impacts?
- How are they making environmental impact reductions that will benefit themselves, your company supply chain and the planet?

¹ Recycled vs Recyclable: Recycled means that a product is made from recycled materials and recyclable means that a product can be recycled at the end of its life

² Biodegradable – Currently only certain waste management services can handle biodegradable waste, and then only if it is clearly separated. If disposing of ‘biodegradable products’, please check with your waste management service as to how you should handle it.

Find out how understanding the company is of your own pain points when it comes to sustainability provision. This is an area that's often overlooked but massively important as it will show how they can accommodate your specific needs and requirements in the long-term. Can they help you on your journey to being a net-zero business? It's no longer enough to be carbon neutral, you need to show continual improvement. Without engaged and involved suppliers who are on the same journey as you, you won't be able to achieve your goals.

Reporting and Accountability

To find a truly green office supplier you need to look at products and services as well as consider the company's ethos. Companies that are truly *doing the right thing* will be transparent in their actions. Third-party certification schemes are a valuable resource in helping identify truly sustainable suppliers and this is no different for stationery suppliers. The schemes provide a framework which helps businesses to measure, report, track progress and set goals to continually improve their sustainability performance. Beyond all else they keep organisations on track with progress and hold them accountable for their ambitions.

Examples of third party accreditation schemes which help with transparency, continuous improvement and commitment to meeting targets include:

- B-Corp,
- The Global Reporting Initiative (GRI),
- Carbon Disclosure Project (CDP) Climate Change Survey Certification,
- ISO accreditation (commonly ISO 14001 and ISO 20400).

How else can a company demonstrate sustainable credentials?

- Supporting the living wage,
- Carbon neutral status,
- Alignment with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) framework,
- Offering 1% for the planet,
- Published sustainability and impact reports,
- Awards are a great way for companies to celebrate accomplishments. However, not all companies wish to enter these or have the resources to do so — a lack of awards doesn't mean a lack of accountability.

Conclusion

Simply put, to make sure you are selecting a truly sustainable office supplies company look at the whole picture, go beyond the name and products. See if they can be held accountable to their 'green' statements and provide value-added services that will complement your own company's sustainability journey.