

**T**raditionally, the best product designers have made bold statements, either through aesthetics, innovative use of materials or cutting-edge production processes. In recent years, the motivating force behind much new product design has quite rightly been sustainability and environmental impact. However, this seems to have led many designers to aim less for the next bold statement and to lean more towards optimistic bluster.

Environmentalists have long since highlighted the need to be aware of environmental factors such as the amount of energy expended in transporting food and its true cost compared to locally sourced and farmed produce. This makes sense in terms of providing the consumer or 'end user' with the material to make an informed choice, so why not adopt this process for the product design industry? There's no harm in the customer seeking to test the green claims of a manufacturer's product to see if the reality is as rosy as the soundbite or ad slogan may suggest. This is especially true of situations where several units of a particular type are required such as ICT and electrical equipment or office furniture. If a lot of money is being spent, the responsibility purchasers have to find out what they are really buying, is a big one. This even truer when it comes to their disposal – in itself a potential source of high environmental impact.

Certain consumer goods that go out of fashion quickly such as clothing and electrical items are now being mass-produced extremely quickly and cheaply abroad, leading to bargain basement deals such as Primark clothing and £20 DVD players at Tesco. With disposable items such as these, it seems that the public desire for inexpensive goods outweighs the collective social conscience about the effects of such production on the environment.

However, in an industry such as furniture, where purchases are less influenced by passing trends or up-to-the-minute micro-chipper, and more by an actual premises and the requirements of its occupants, products aren't likely to be rendered obsolete or useless within a year. Managers aren't as concerned with the cheapest product available, because they need something that is going to last longer than 'this season'. Durability, comfort and functionality are all desirable qualities that organisations are

prepared to pay extra for, rather than settling for inferior alternatives that might be a bit easier on the wallet. By the same token, many organisations are now rushing to kit themselves out with the latest in sustainably produced furnishings, with designers and manufacturers all winking coquettishly to draw the focus of corporate consumers with socially conscious money to spend.

Any design or trade show that you care to attend at the moment is full of manufacturers flaunting their apparent green credentials at stand visitors, but before buying into the claims and scooping up armfuls of the accompanying literature, potential customers should investigate just what these claims actually mean in a practical sense. Design, manufacture and transport with an eye on the environment is clearly a major motivation for companies in this field, but green sensibilities that look good on paper are one thing, whereas ensuring they are evident in practice is another.

As well as product miles, or carbon offsetting, many furniture companies are making real inroads into investing in the use of recycled materials. However, if a company claims to be using recycled materials in the production of its furniture, all well and good, but what is happening to their own products

# Green, or is it?

IS THE FOCUS ON ECO-FRIENDLINESS WEAKENING OTHER ASPECTS OF DESIGN, AND WHAT CAN WE DO TO BE SURE THAT PRODUCTS ARE 'GREEN', ANYWAY?

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## SPEAK EASY

once they are surplus to requirements? If they end up as landfill because no process is in place to recycle them, then trumpeting the use of recycled materials at the product's place of origin becomes a moot point.

Similarly, even if a chair is suitable itself for recycling, is it likely that an office manager is going to spend time dismantling and recycling furniture? With so many of manufacturers advertising their products as 90-odd percent recyclable, these claims are somewhat diminished in value if their green product ends up as just another emissions oozing lump in the 'zero percent recycled' landfill stew.

If the claims of recycle-ability are truly valid, they should be backed by a serious commitment to follow through by offering a collection and recycling service as part of the aftersales package, picking up and disposing of the chair once it is no longer needed by the original purchaser.

Not only does this remove the hassle of correct disposal for the company, it also allows the manufacturer to re-use or recycle any of the elements of the original product that they can, meaning less having to source brand new materials during the production process. This means less pollutants created by manufacturers and less of a headache for end users wishing to avoid being hit by new increases in landfill tax and the like. A win-win situation for everyone involved.

Some companies are also claiming products as carbon negative, which again if true, is an amazing and admirable achievement. But end users need to check if this statement includes provision for transport, storage and packaging of the product, and not just the actual manufacturing process.

To avoid any confusion in the future, whether intentionally generated or not, perhaps furniture could do with a chunk of legislation similar to the WEEE Directive, designed to encourage a sense of corporate social responsibility in the disposal of short term electrical products. The interior furnishings industry would definitely benefit from a similar code of practice that would address the validity of green claims made by manufacturers of products and environmentally sound disposal.

Maybe it will take something like this to wipe out the emergent culture of overoptimistic claims among some designers, and further encourage those really making a difference with products that not only endure as design standards but also serve as examples of sustainably conscious design to that hold up to scrutiny and offer a standard to aim for and surpass.

If not, we can't expect customers to be any more committed to the environment when buying furniture than those that aim to supply it. ■

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