Chemicals That Don't WERC

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The Sustainable Product Index [1] that Walmart announced last month has everyone scrambling to figure out exactly what is involved in calculating a product's carbon footprint. Eventually, the retail giant wants to label products with a sustainability rating. As if that wasn't enough for its suppliers to deal with, Walmart has changed its aggressive stance on the use of hazardous chemicals in its products, choosing instead to rely on the GreenWERCS screening service to source "environmentally preferable" products. Walmart is going green, and if you don't keep up you'll drown in your own carbon emissions.

Firstly, my thoughts on the Sustainable Product Index: Bravo, Walmart. Sure, it's a public relations exercise stemming from negative publicity the company received for pursing profits over the public interest. But the three-step process outlined by Walmart will induce short-term changes that politicians could never achieve.

The first phase of the plan is to send Walmart's 100,000 suppliers a survey of 15 questions designed to identify sustainability efforts in the areas of:

- Energy and climate.
- Material efficiency.
- Natural resources.
- People and community.

This survey will underhandedly serve as a to-do list for any company that intends to maintain a long-term relationship with the retailer.

Accurately calculating the carbon footprint of a company's entire product range will probably be ridiculously time-consuming and expensive (as experienced by the Tesco supermarket chain in the U.K.), but it is a necessary part of the transition to greener products. It will not be good enough to simply say that a product is sustainable — without accurate data, you're just another person with an opinion.

Don't forget that this index is about more than calculating and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Material efficiency looks at water use, solid waste and setting targets for the reduction of both; Natural resources establishes guidelines for sourcing raw materials that comply with environmental, workplace and safety regulations; and People and community covers ethical considerations at suppliers' production facilities.

Another element of Walmart's sustainability drive was to remove hazardous chemicals from its products. As part of the Chemical Intensive Product initiative

launched in 2007, the company identified a hit list of 20 “chemicals of concern,” including propoxur, permethrin and nonyl phenol ethoxylates (NPEs). Suppliers using these substances would be encouraged to remove these chemicals in return for “recognition and reward” (whatever that means), as well as the privilege of continued trading with the world’s largest retailer.

However, in Walmart’s 2009 sustainability report, the company announced a change in its approach. The good news is that Walmart no longer wants to ban any chemicals, but they will give preference to products that score well in the GreenWERCS screening process.

This screening report will not identify the chemicals in your product, but will give a green rating based on the quantity of chemicals that have health or environmental concerns, as identified by weighted regulatory lists. For example, products containing large amounts of known carcinogens will score higher (worse) than those containing only small amounts of known carcinogens. On the other hand, products containing large amounts of *suspected* carcinogens could score higher than products containing small amounts of known carcinogens.

Last month I wrote about The Chemical Facility Antiterrorism Act of 2009 [2], and criticized the policy of replacing high-risk chemicals while ignoring industry concerns and alternative solutions. It’s refreshing to see that Walmart will use a more robust system for assessing the safety of its products, taking into account the amount of a hazardous chemical being used and not just its existence in a product.

Please note that I’m not a Walmart fanboy or another member of the media who’s blinded by the company’s public relations machine and onslaught of environmental buzzwords. I will continue to scrutinize the actions of this company and criticize it if it hides behind a false wall of sustainability. But credit where credit is due: Walmart is creating a model of sustainable business that everyone will benefit from in the end.

If you think that Walmart's sustainability policies are just smoke and mirrors, drop me a line at luke.simpson@advantagemedia.com [3].

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