

Next goal: full recyclability

Sustainability goals are closer every day with clever initiatives in building materials and design, more efficient and environmentally friendly energy systems and the recycling of water and waste. Will the next leap forward be full recyclability for all the other everyday products used in our libraries and information services?

Once upon a time evaluating the sustainability of an item wasn't much more than a combination of a handful of facts and a few best guesses, with a dash of emotion thrown in. These days it's a formalised process, made more comprehensible by the layman because the industry has matured and so has our understanding. It's still not an easy thing to do, which is why there is a burgeoning compliance industry growing healthily right alongside it. But more and more, adherence to 'responsible procurement practice', where the life of a product from manufacture to disposal is judged in great detail against the environmental, social and economic costs of purchase, is taking hold.

Traditionally, the first point of focus on sustainability tends to be levelled at the materials of which a product – be it a building or a box – is made. But it's the end stage of a product's lifecycle that represents the next challenge to suppliers.

"The demands of our customers have certainly changed over the years," says Albox Sales and Marketing Manager Peter Smeets. "There is now significant awareness, especially in government. Our customers are now more aware of sustainability issues in day-to-day operations and there is increasing demand for full recyclability in products."

Albox Australia pioneered the use of

polypropylene in their products in Australia 20 years ago and now produce polypropylene versions of just about everything that used to be paper or paperboard.

Polypropylene is made from waste gases and it's everywhere, from yoghurt cups to car bumper bars. Happily for library and information professionals with storage

responsibilities, it's inert, acid free, simply refuses to give house room to mould, and can itself be completely recycled.

The company has also tackled the longstanding problem with folder disposal by introducing nylon folder rings to replace the metal rings that have been traditionally used and which made folders and binders non-recyclable.

It's just one of a myriad of necessary steps towards the total recyclability goal for the small everyday items we sometimes forget about.

Furniture is a much more obvious component of a working space and apparently it also ends up as a significant contribution to waste.

"Furniture accounts for an enormous percentage of landfill," says Wharington International Manager Yvette Karklins, pointing out that we are all far too used to dumping furniture for hard rubbish collection these days. This is probably why, so far, demand for Wharington's service to take back old furniture for recycling is off to a slower start than she would like.

Like Albox, Yvette says the team at Wharington also invested early in the green revolution, approaching the Centre for Design at RMIT University for help in the late 1990s. At that time there was no organised green industry in this country and no third party certification to separate the good from the bad. Imports from more advanced green thinking countries such as the USA were knocking the stuffing out of the Australian manufacturing sector in sales to corporate clients such as local governments and libraries.

The result of that collaboration was a range of furniture featuring recycled plastic mouldings that has now – some 30 years later – attained full green accreditation through the global environmental label Ecospecifier.

Yvette Karklins believes the next step is for governments to step up to improve recycling infrastructure and services and to take a long hard look at cheap imports.

"The cheaper a product is, the faster it goes to landfill," she says. And if it's imported, it's not going to go back to the country of origin's landfill, it's going to go into Australian landfill. That's a very real cost to our environment and community and an issue that has yet to be resolved.



POLYPROPYLENE – CREATED FROM WASTE GAS AND COMPLETELY RECYCLABLE

PHONE IT IN: WHARINGTON INTERNATIONAL'S RABBIT SHELL IS MADE FROM 100% POST CONSUMER TELSTRA TELEPHONE CASINGS AND CAN ITSELF BE FULLY RECYCLED AT THE END OF ITS LIFE

Lee Welch
leewelch@ozemail.com.au