

Sustainable Production



Riding the Wave

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This year has seen an unprecedented interest in the environment from government, business and the public. People are more aware than ever of the issues facing the planet and, perhaps more importantly, want to do something about them. This presents EIC members with tremendous opportunities. The trick will be turning those opportunities into outcomes for both our businesses and the environment.

Currently, many companies still see environmental issues as something outside of core business activities. Although some leading companies recognise that environmental issues are affected by every business decision, they are still a small minority. One of the aims of Envirowise is to embed resource efficiency consideration into everyday business decision-making. Such issues should be as normal to take account of, as finance and human resources. Changing perceptions so that environment is treated this way would raise the perceived value of environmental goods and services and, hopefully, widen opportunities for both EIC members and their customers.

There is little doubt that carbon and climate change issues are top of most businesses environmental considerations. The aim of being 'zero carbon' has been stated by an increasing number of companies. However, this usually relates to their direct use of energy. There are often bigger overall carbon reductions to be made by reducing the use of material resources and water. These can also reduce costs and help other environmental targets. Understanding this and getting the message across to government, business and the public will be a key part of moving to a low-carbon economy.

Over the years, the focus of environmental issues has moved from discrete point source pollution to the more global, diffuse problems that we see now. It isn't always obvious that the environmental goods and services industry has recognised this change. A look at any advertising in

environmental journals will show single-issue technology to the fore. Whilst there will always be a need for this, it is important to recognise the limitations of such a narrow focus. Few customers will see benefits other than legislative compliance. They will also continue to consider environmental improvements as costly. Increasingly, we hear that companies and government are asking how such products measure up in terms of carbon reduction. It is likely to be beneficial to have the answers ready.

At Envirowise, we have seen a growing interest in ecological footprinting and carbon footprinting. While some technically minded people are concerned about the methodology, many businesses just want to get on with using footprinting to help them manage their businesses. Although there are many slightly differing methodologies available at present, those that give a simple, understandable output to users seem to be finding favour with the market. In studies where we have used footprinting techniques, the results have sometimes shown impacts in unexpected places. For example, one manufacturing company found that 95 per cent of its carbon footprint was from its materials and waste rather than its direct energy use. This meant that small improvements in production efficiency could lead to large carbon reductions higher up in the supply chain.

Over the last few years, Envirowise has worked with a number of major businesses to help them guide their suppliers in improving resource efficiency.

The Carbon Trust has recently demonstrated the benefits of working with suppliers to reduce the direct energy use of both customers and suppliers. All of this activity shows that there are considerable inefficiencies in the way we work with and transport materials. Reducing these inefficiencies must be good for business and the environment. Those EIC members that can help their customers in this regard should be able to prosper.

With the interest in carbon, it can be easy to miss the interrelated issues of water and biodiversity. For those dealing with business customers, the link between their activities and biodiversity can be very far removed from everyday activity. Using techniques such as ecological footprinting can help people to understand how their activities put pressure on the biological systems of the planet. However, even this can be rather esoteric. The most powerful method for helping to make a difference might be to concentrate on reducing material use and using more benign materials.

Unfortunately, the use and disposal of water often gets lost in arguments over water company leakage. We need to move the debate beyond this. Efficient use of water has direct benefits for anyone who pays for water. It also has the benefit of reducing some of the impact of the treatment and transport of water. Because these activities are invisible to people, we often take them for granted and forget that servicing our needs has a large impact. Reduce our needs and we reduce our impact.

I leave you with a final thought. We often hear about energy, water and waste but when you think about it, these three issues are not equal. Energy and water are measurable inputs but waste is an output and, hopefully, only a small proportion of overall outputs. To really move forward on environmental issues, we need to change perceptions so that we all think in terms of energy, water and materials. Although a large part of our industry is engaged in waste management and related issues, the bigger environmental challenge lies with managing resources. We all need to focus on measuring and managing inputs. If we do, we can help demonstrate the larger benefits that our industry can deliver. Good luck with riding the wave. Remember, it is best to be slightly ahead of it or you risk being swamped!