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Carbon calculation does not add up – James Cryer

Tuesday, 22 March 2011

By Print21

Concentrating on carbon dioxide continues to distract us from the bigger evil, pollution, which is the real demon.

But unfortunately that word seems to have an old-fashioned ring to it. It's so last-century, when things were simpler, remedies clearer and actions more decisive. Life was uncomplicated by the vested interests, stakeholders (another shocking word!), political lobbyists and other rent-seekers, all of whom now infect the climate warming/carbon emissions debate.

So carbon dioxide has been elected as the fall guy, the scapegoat. Whether or not it is actually guilty seems to have completely escaped our gaze.

This is why the so-called Carbon Calculator is such a dangerous tool in the wrong hands. It attempts to measure the unquantifiable. How can anyone measure a tonne of CO2 particularly when gas is effectively weightless? Maybe you tip the bathroom scales up on the ceiling? The whole concept is madness personified.

Therefore I wish to re-address five questions for the supporters of Carbon Calculators – five questions, which any buyer would expect to be answered.

First: who can test or validate the accuracy of such a calculator, when gaseous emissions are, by their very nature, elusive? We can't even get auditors to agree when counting something as visible as money in terms of companies reporting "audited" results. You'll never get consensus on counting something that's colourless, nebulous and invisible as CO2.

Second: I suspect the difference, in terms of CO2 emissions, between the best and the worst printers is minimal. After all, we all use the same inks, paper and basically buy the same presses. Sure, there will be some minor differences but it's not like there is some vast difference that justifies getting out the calculator.

Third: how far do you go in pursuing the carbon devil up the supply chain? Already we have Scope levels. In the manufacture of paper, for example, Scope #3 includes reference to third parties such as "suppliers to the suppliers". How far does the dragnet extend?

Fourth: the whole concept of gaining carbon virtuosity by means of "offsets" is very dubious. It means you don't really have to reduce your emissions; you simply buy someone else's credits. It's a bit like murdering ten grannies and then kicking into the poor box.

Fifth: and this is the killer-punch. Let's assume our carbon-calculator has, by some miracle, been able to accurately take into account all these variables, and come up with a number. All it has done is recognise the upstream activities. It hasn't and it can't anticipate how environmentally friendly is the purpose of the printed material. For example, it may have scored highly in terms of eco-friendly production processes and sources, but was actually junk mail that clogged-up letterboxes. Or telephone books that were never read.

Needless to say a calculator would not be able to take into account all these issues – many of which are based on emotional value judgements or dubious assumptions.

The other issue of course is the cost of implementing all these admirable programs. According to Tony Duncan (Print21, February), the reality is, that environmental aspects fell way down the list – and that (shock!) price had become the highest priority.

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We should hasten slowly before handing too much power to the big corporates who are the ones driving this whole carbon neutrality fad. The thought of a twenty-something making major print-buying decisions based on his/her carbon calculator is too scary to contemplate – but it may be a glimpse into the future?

Nobody's saying we shouldn't seek to reduce pollution, but the devil appears in many other disguises than being draped in carbon dioxide.

James Cryer,
JDA Print Recruitment

The industry can't afford to lose talent such as Joan Grace
[.http://t.co/DuGDpXtwbC](http://t.co/DuGDpXtwbC)

Colin Longbottom heads towards the exit Good man Colin, hope your saddlebags are well loaded for the sunset ride.<http://t.co/d5oamorf2X>

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