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### If paper didn't grow on trees – James Cryer commentary

Tuesday, 25 October 2011

By Print21

**Paper is damned annoying. If only you could dig the damn stuff out of the ground. Governments would actually encourage you to do it – as they do with coal or uranium. Or, if it came from the sea, you could fish for it quite happily to your heart's content until you'd practically exhausted the supply, without restraint, just as Chile has done with the Patagonian toothfish.**

Why, oh why does the damn stuff we like to scribble on have to come from trees?

Is it that the stately trunk and limbs send primordial echoes down our spine whenever we see a chainsaw being applied to their bark? But some trees are regularly massacred in a ritualised frenzy of threshing, where not a blade is left alive but devoured by a cruel metallic monster who shows no mercy as it tramples remaining shoots into oblivion. But nobody emits a cry of anguish or rushes to these trees' defence.

Why? Because this is wheat – and we've been taught from an early age that it's OK to chop down wheat.

So what's the difference? None really – trees, wheat, harp-seals, foxes – they're all God's creatures but mankind decrees that it's OK to kill, maim, wound, injure some, but not others.

Trees – or at least tall ones – seem to have been imbued with sacred properties that make it impossible for people to see them as crops. And we will never be believed as an industry until – somehow – we can ring-fence plantation forests from old-growth ones.

It is into this collision of conflicting passions and emotions that the newly formed Australian-chapter of *Two Sides* is plunging. Its enemy is that most elusive of antagonists: pre-conceived ideas and ingrained bias.

In fairness, it's not seeking to stem the gradual long-term decline in the use of paper. Its goal is to tackle head-on the use of misleading information often peddled by large vested interests – be they government departments or large financial institutions, who advocate the use of electronic media for environmental reasons.

For centuries print has enjoyed being top dog in the food chain, with no natural predators. Inevitably, we now face a period of re-adjustment where print may not necessarily be the most appropriate medium – such as annual reports, junk mail, telephone books – and even for paying bills. We must accept that consumers now have choices and some prefer to receive these documents electronically.



I suspect *Two Sides* is being realistic in not trying to push print as the default option – it's merely seeking to dispel the myths put about by some groups that print is bad for the environment.

Casting themselves as latter-day myth-busters, they've identified six furbies all of which need de-bunking. To me the most important one is the link in the public's mind between paper and logging in old-growth forests

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(be it Brazil, Indonesia, Siberia or sadly, Tasmania). It doesn't matter that only about 11% is used in paper. The great – and almost insurmountable – problem is how to prove that the paper in the book you're holding did in fact come from approved plantation sources.

I know we've got any number of accreditation bodies, but with paper's supply-chain being so long and complex and often snaking back to the remotest corners of the earth, such verification is virtually impossible.

We accuse the other side of sometimes greenwashing, but we have to be careful to avoid such accusations: open any book these days and you'll see the FSC tick. But read the fine print and it's usually so wishy-washy (referring vaguely to approved sources, mix and blended) that you could drive a proverbial logging-truck through the specs.

We live in an imperfect world, where illogicality and inconsistency go hand in hand – why else would we have a carbon tax that doesn't tax petrol?

Two Sides is an attempt to re-balance the fight, in the battle for the hearts and minds. That's the first stumbling block – to take aim at such a broad constituency, as prejudice inhabits all sectors of society: the man in the street, government departments, school-kids – even print buyers.

But to its credit, it derives legitimacy from its position representing all steps along the graphic communications value chain – selling the sizzle and the steak – which may have been lacking in the previous Paper – a part of everyday life campaign.

In my view, it's a worthwhile vehicle upon which our industry may begin its journey – it's first faltering steps in self-promotion, something we've never been very good at.

#### **I think it deserves to succeed, given the following observations -**

It must recognise is that print is not always the optimal communications response and that print must always pass the fitness for purpose test. In more and more cases (e.g. electronic billing) it may lose the race, but...

Vested interests can't be allowed to use environmental concerns to justify electronic options. In most cases, e.g. annual reports, the real reason is simply that companies wish to flog off the cost of printing to the end-recipient. In fact the carbon footprint may be bigger if people are forced to print out pages on their copier.

Proper emphasis must be given to print (the sizzle) versus paper (the steak). There'll always be an inbuilt tension between paper-merchants and converters, where the former can be accused of just wanting to keep the mills full. But the future fortunes of print and paper will start to diverge as the focus shifts to small-run, high-value printed matter, where the actual paper content becomes relatively low. We can't be tempted to advocate a return to the good old days of vast volumes of paper, just for the sake of churning out more phone books and newspapers.

The funding model is always a popular topic – on how to handle the questions of simplicity, transparency and equity? For printing companies (I can't speak for paper-mills or publishers) there can really only be one answer that satisfies all the above, and that is a levy charged on paper consumption. A miniscule amount (e.g. \$1 per every \$2,000 paper purchased) that falls across all printers in proportion to their paper usage is the 'only way to kill the cat'. The money thus collected is paid into the fighting fund.

**Don't forget the kids.** We can all cite cases where well-meaning teachers have preached the evils of paper being damaging to the environment. The Brits have already implemented a program for school-kids, which works within the curriculum, delivering an introduction to printing from a practical perspective. It's called 'Print-IT' and it does all the things we hope Two Sides will do: to provide a better understanding of print as an environmentally friendly process.

We could do worse than adopt and adapt it (especially after they've done all the hard work)

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

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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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