

The Importance of Eco-Labeling

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As Europeans we are becoming more and more conscience of a cleaner and healthier environment. We all aspire to better air and water quality, proper waste management, and the correct use of our natural resources. However, all of these are under extreme pressure despite improvements in certain areas. Everyday products contribute greatly to these environmental pressures and can affect our health in many ways. There are a vast range of chemicals, approximately 100,000, being used in the manufacture of products, many of these are unregulated and can have toxic, allergenic and bio-accumulative effects on health at various stages in their life cycle.

The European Eco-Label, established ten years ago, set out to promote products that were truly ecologically sound; to set up a system of accreditation that discerning consumers across Europe could trust, and that eco-label product manufacturers could market these under ‘the flower’ logo.

There is a huge difference in public awareness across Europe regarding environmental issues - from nationality, age, social groupings, to urban/rural communities. Some people are very conscience of their health and personal impact on the surrounding environment and as consumers they seek out products that will perform to high standards. On the other hand, the vast majority of Europeans are insufficiently aware of the impact their everyday consumption choices have on the environment and because of this do not typically act in a responsible manner.

Product manufacturers and retailers tend to use any ecological aspect of a product as a marketing tool disregarding the non-sustainable aspects of their product. They often claim their product is ‘green’ and ‘eco-friendly’ without adequate verification. Consumers are confused and wary of these self acclaimed associations. Most of these products (including packaging) are made from materials which readily contribute to atmospheric emissions, water pollution and soil contamination, leading to an accumulation of toxic chemicals in our bodies, our homes, our environment.

In an ideal world, all products would be required to conform to the Eco-Label standard. However, this is a voluntary system, so to encourage increased involvement, manufacturers should be made more aware of the financial and ecological benefits of upgrading their products to Eco-Label

standards. Likewise, consumers generally should be more conscious of their personal health and the environmental benefits of buying such products.

Products with the ‘The Flower’ logo need a stronger marketing and public awareness campaign across Europe and a more visible presence. All Eco-Label products should be proud to feature the Label and have ‘The Flower’ logo in a prominent position on the front of their packaging or clearly shown on an appliance. This logo should be graphically large and there should also be a reference to how the product complies to high ecological standards in the EU.

Take for example the ‘The Blue Angel’ scheme in Germany. After 25 years the scheme boasts over 3000 products from around 700 label users in Germany. It offers industry, trades and crafts companies the opportunity to document their environmental competence in a simple and inexpensive way for all to see, thereby increasing their competitive market potential. The benefits for consumers are also clear in that they are given practical guidance in selecting what they buy.

‘Fair Trade’ is another success story. It links low income producers with consumer markets and educates consumers about the importance of purchasing products which support living wages and safe and healthy conditions for workers in the developing world.

The ‘Forest Stewardship Council’ (FSC) was formed in 1993, and applies to over 50 countries around the world. It is an effective system for guiding forest management towards sustainable outcomes and assures consumers of this sound environmental chain of custody.

‘The Flower’ as a label is slowly becoming recognised by consumers in certain European countries but in Ireland and many other European countries, few people would know about it and seek it out.

Since its inception 10 years ago, many companies have recognized the benefits of taking on the European Eco-Label scheme. There are currently 135 companies licensed under the scheme and it has been awarded to 21 product groups. These products range from paints, detergents and refrigerators to tourist accommodation. The number is growing and it is the only voluntary scheme which covers products moving across borders in Europe. It sets ecological criteria for a range of products and services in a transparent way so that the consumer can make a more informed choice in

order to support sustainable consumption patterns. It takes the lifecycle (from cradle to grave) of a product into account e.g. the materials, health implications, and waste factors that impact on the environment.

In countries like Ireland and the UK there appears to be very little awareness and response to the scheme. There are currently no Irish manufacturers with the Eco Label and we need to change this. Ireland can take example from countries such as Denmark, France, and Italy in this regard.

So how can we encourage Irish manufactures and others in Europe to get involved? There needs to be an urgency for a concerted campaign to create awareness regarding the importance and benefits of Eco- Labeling on products and services. There are a lot of enlightened, educated and environmentally aware consumers across Europe who are discerning about the products they buy and their health and environment generally. But aside from this core percentage of Europeans, the organizers of the European Eco Label scheme face an enormous challenge in educating and converting the majority of people and manufacturers towards the value of investing in these products.

A major drive such as the 'European Flower Week', October 18th-24th will help create a more widespread awareness of the value of such products among consumers. Activities across Europe in schools and stores, backed up by a major PR campaign, will help to promote the values of the Label. Hopefully by October, Phase 1 of the campaign on European Eco Labeling will have improved the situation, and manufacturers and distributors across Europe will have become more motivated and involved.

Eco-Labeling also included services. The tourism sector is a major service industry representing 5% of European GDP. Tourist accommodation can put pressure on water and energy resources and lead to inappropriate waste management. It can also result in disturbing local bio-diversity – habitats, wild life and landscape. Tourists seek out undisturbed, natural landscapes, healthy and free of pollution. There is a growing demand for ecologically sound tourist facilities. Through this scheme tourists can be assured when booking holidays that their accommodation will meet all environmental standards, regarding site location, construction, furnishing fit-outs and the general running of the establishment. The scheme encourages a holistic chain of custody.

Ireland is particularly poised to take advantage of Eco-Label tourist facilities. Visitors to Ireland expect a 'green' and unspoiled countryside, but

are often disappointed. There is a genuine market for this tourism niche. A lot of the damage being done to our environment results from tourism. Therefore, for a more sustainable strategy for tourism in Ireland the whole tourist industry needs to address this issue.

In my opinion, Eco-Labeling should not just focus on reducing hazardous chemicals; it should also look at the wider environmental impact of products such as;

- 1. Use of renewable, recycled and sustainably managed sources of materials,**
- 2. Reducing the embodied energy and green house gas emissions in the manufacture of products**
- 3. Improving the environmental performance of the product in its useful life.**

Reducing the environmental impact at disposal - applying the reuse and recycle principles. All products should conform to European Eco Label standards. The scheme should lead the way for the manufacture of all products across Europe into the future. It should also reduce imports of non-sustainable products into Europe. Most services could also be upgraded to this standard of excellence. Each year we should strive to improve on the previous Eco-Label standard. There should be a continuous review, assessment and improvement of all Eco-Labeled products.

Major areas requiring improvement are agriculture and fisheries. Another is building products. Why can't all our food be produced to an Eco-Label standard? Why can't all our homes be environmentally audited in the same way? In my view, Eco-Labeling should be something that applies to all products and services affecting our everyday life, and not only within European boundaries but encouraged worldwide.