



On PAPER

By Constance J. Sidles

Recycle This!

Thirty years ago, my newlywed brother brought his Israeli bride to visit Seattle. We showed her all the touristy sights: Pike Place Market, where the fishmongers throw dead salmon at each other; the Space Needle, with its spectacular views and peculiar food (we ate boiled fern fronds). We drove around the Olympic Peninsula so she could see the rainforest: towering Douglas firs and twisty red cedars crowding the edge of the road for miles. Our visitor was silent—from awe, I thought. Finally I asked, “What do you think?” In broken English, she replied, “Trees trees trees. I want go to mall.”

Last year when her daughter came to visit, we reenacted the family odyssey. The fishmongers still heaved fish, the Space Needle still served odd food (though the ferns had earned a well-deserved vacation), and the malls were better stocked than ever. But the Olympics? “Pretty view,” said my niece, admiring the vistas. This time it was I who was silent—the view stretched to the horizon because the trees had been clearcut. The once-dense rainforest now looked like a poodle just back from the salon.

Last October the Earth’s population hit 6 billion. The population has doubled since the 1960s. Years ago, a prescient high school science teacher told his class, “The day will come when the only plants and animals left on Earth will be the ones that Man finds useful.”

Unfortunately for the Olympic ecosystem, we have found trees useful but forests not.

As a print-production manager, I’m not going to tell you to quit using paper. I subscribe to several magazines. I buy books. I read newspapers. As a trained Egyptologist, I consider the invention of paper and writing two of the most glorious achievements of our species.

And yet, I find myself remembering a marketing study that I participated in years ago. I was asked to save all my direct mail for one month. Researchers gave me three folders to file everything in: one for offers that I bought, one for offers that I considered but did not buy, and one for

mail pieces that I didn’t read at all. In one month, I received more than 40 pounds of junk mail. I bought nothing. I read four offers. Everything else went into the “instant-dispose” folder.

In many cities, that folder would have ended up in a landfill. In Seattle, because of our curbside recycling program, the folder went to a recycled-paper mill in Oregon that takes used paper from three states and makes beautiful new paper. It’s easy here to feel good about junk mail. Every time I place a newspaper flyer in the recycling bin, I feel righteous. I’m helping the environment, right?

Not according to the recycling managers downtown. They say that recycling is only one-third of the solution to our resource and disposal problems. As an alternative, they suggest following this mantra: reduce, reuse, recycle. “If you really want to help the environment,” explained one manager, “first think about ways that you can reduce your use of paper. Second, try to reuse it again before you get rid of it. Only after you do the first two things should you consider recycling.”

She had some specific suggestions for publishers and paper buyers.

REDUCE

- Trim your mailing lists. Don’t duplicate addresses. Don’t send mailings to people who rarely or never respond.
- Ask yourself if you really need four or five blow-in cards per issue.
- Keep documents in digital format, if possible, instead of printing them out. Use e-mail instead of regular mail.

REUSE

- Befriend those awkward little piles of cut-up paper that your office manager gives you to use for notes. Without a doubt many of us find them inelegant, to say the least. But we need to get over that.
- Get double use out of your mailing covers by putting a return offer on them.

RECYCLE

- If your city lacks a curbside recycling program, work to get one.
- Make sure that your paper products are recyclable.
- Buy recycled paper yourself.

As an industry, we have the responsibility to take the lead in the wise use of our world’s paper resources. Are we wise? Or should we just forget about it and go to the mall? ▀

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Illustration by Zach Trenholm