ASTRO 3D guidelines for purchasing sustainable merchandise

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These guidelines outline what should be noted when looking for merchandise. There are much more assessments that can be conducted, but these are simple that do not require in-depth expert analysis. There are a number of things to consider when making a sustainable assessment, and it is hard to rank the importance of these properties because it varies from product to product. These guidelines have tried to rank the importance, starting with the most important things to consider when buying merchandise.

This document has three parts:

1. Get informed about what to look for when faced with a purchasing decision

2. Make informed decisions using a supplied scoring matrix.

3. Recommended companies and products , and external resources .

At the end of this document you will find a scorecard for evaluating companies and products, as well as resources that evaluate the effectiveness of environmental management systems in place for distributors.

Get informed

Recycled Content
You help reduce waste in two ways when you buy recycled content. You help by creating a market for recycled materials, and by reducing the extraction of new materials. In turn this will reduce emissions required to extract new materials. Recycled materials can be identified through a product's description, or by checking that the plastic content has an R in front of the material makeup: rPET is recycled polyethylene terephthalate.

Accreditations
External environmental accreditations for the overall operations of an organisation or the product itself is important to understand. Different products have different accreditation levels that they can achieve. The ISO standard (ISO14001) for organisations is an easy way to assess the effectiveness of their environmental management systems. A company with ISO14001 standard accreditation has clearly devoted money and effort to ensuring that they have an effective environmental management system in place, which has been externally audited.

Some brands will be eager to highlight their environmentally friendly products as a means to advertise specific products. This will not always hold the same weight as an external accreditation of an effective environmental system, but it can help when trying to compare two products under the one brand umbrella.

Local materials

Locally sourced products can boost your sustainability outcomes, and is perhaps the easiest assessment to make beyond recycled content and external accreditations. While using local materials does not necessarily mean the organisation is involved in sustainable manufacturing, it is an easy way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions related to the products transport.

If you're ever unsure about whether a company uses local materials or not, it's suggested to email them and ask. If they do use local materials and this is not advertised on their website, they will be keen to tell you about their material sources. And if they don't use local materials then your email has told them that potential customers care about locally sourced materials. This kind of feedback can be invaluable for businesses, particularly if they have not previously considered switching to use local materials. Your email might be a critical determinant in getting them to switch to local materials!

Know the chain

Many people may be surprised to learn that forced labour exists at the earliest points in many global supply chains. While this important topic differs slightly from sustainability, it is critically related in that it is important to know the supply chain for a given organisation or product. Know the chain , one of the resources listed at the end of this document, can be extremely useful for investigating the supply chain of a specific product or organisation.

The product itself

It's worthwhile to make a simple assessment to understand the durability of a product, and how long the product is expected to last. This can be assessed by the materials used, and collective experiences with products like this in the past. For example, when you have received USB drives from a conference is there a particular attribute that made you use, or not use, that product for a long period of time. Ask around: people will always be keen to vote on what freebies they will get!

It's also important to assess the raw materials that go into the product. Natural materials usually produce the least amount of emissions, but it's important to understand if those materials are sustainably sourced.

Plastic-free is often seen as an eco-friendly choice. But it's also worth checking to see how the product is packaged. Does your box of 100 plastic-free merchandise items come in a box where those items are individually wrapped in a bit of clear plastic? If a supplier advertises an item as plastic-free they will be very quick to clarify how the products are wrapped and posted.

Educate the recipients

This is a simple step that works for any and every product. It's important to champion sustainable products and educate people on the benefits of the products chosen, and avenues for reuse or recycling. For example, highlighting the benefits of the natural products used in the merchandise will resonate with people, and helps educate them for when they are faced with a purchasing decision. Similarly, educating people about how items can be reused or recycled will extend the life cycle of the product and reduce waste. This might include companies that specialise in recycling that item, or educating about which parts of the product can be recycled. It also might be educating about what a carbon offset product means, or how an organic container can break down in your garden in 100 days.

This education ensures that people understand the benefits of the product. Merchandise that has this education through labels or website information is usually a simple and good indicator that the company is an environmentally conscious organisation.

It's easy to collect this information together for merchandise that is distributed at a conference, and that way the recipient always knows where to look at the end of that product's life cycle.

Waste hierarchy

Understanding the disposal avenues for the merchandise will help in recognising the end of life impacts. This can be done in conjunction with the hierarchy of waste: reduce, reuse, recycle, and then dispose.

It's important to understand that all products reach an end of life at some point. That means knowing what the disposal avenue looks like for a product is crucial. When a product reaches its end of life and if disposed, does this product pose any hazardous risk by containing hazardous materials? While disposal is the least desirable outcome it can be important to compare the product make up to know exactly what happens when that end of product disposal point is reached.

Recyclable products are often seen to have positive environmental outcomes, but it is important to understand the ease of recycling. For example, soft plastic is relatively easy to recycle, but electronic waste requires specialised disposal locations. A simple check of what recycling avenue a product can have will help to understand if the product itself will most likely end in a recycling stream.

Biodegradable or compostable products may also be highlighted as green products. But it's important to understand if they will be likely composted by the consumers. For example, not all councils or households have food organics and garden organics (FOGO) compositing available, so the sustainable benefit of a compostable material may be negated if it is unable or unlikely to be composted in practice. It is also important to understand that some products marketed as compostable *(especially plastics)* can only be broken down in industrial composters, not in landfill or even home composting.

Reusable products are easy to identify. It's very beneficial if the products or materials can be reused after the first use. For example, reusable coffee cups have become enormously popular in Australia, but it is important to understand if it will actually be reused. If everyone already has five reusable coffee cups then will they really reuse this new one? However, if the reusable product can be easily recycled then this is of great benefit.

The main thing to remember is that handing out fewer items overall (reduce), that are carefully thought out, is the easiest way to achieve good sustainable outcomes.

Make informed decisions

Now that we know what to look for, let's put it together into a scoring matrix so that we can rank different companies and products. Each item (product or company) will receive a score between 0-2, and we will tally the scores at the end.

Scorecard matrix

Below is a simple scoring matrix of how products or companies can be scored.

Score	0	1	2
Recycled Content	No recycled content	Some recycled content	100% recycled content
Accreditation	No accreditation	Internal environmental accreditation	External environmental accreditation
Local Material	Overseas product	Manufacturing in Australia	Materials and Manufacturing in Australia
Product Material	Virgin material	Recycled material or raw materials (RPET or bamboo)	Recycled material and raw materials (recycled paper/cardboard)
Labels	No labels or information (pens often have no info)	Clear disposable labels or product information	Clear disposable labels and product information
Waste Hierarchy	Landfill	Reusable (that will go to landfill) or recyclable/compostable	Reusable and recyclable/compostable at end of life

Recommendations and resources

Based on the information provided here, and the scoring matrix above, we can score a few companies and provide recommendations for specific companies or products. It is clear from the scoring matrix below very few companies or products will ever reach a perfect score (of 36). But you can also see that even conscientious, committed organisations can end up with a relatively low score overall (e.g., under 10). *Humans are used to living unsustainably!*

	Recycled content	Accreditation	Local material	Product material	Labels	Waste hierarchy	Total
etikoMERCH (Clothing)	0	2	1	0	1	2	6
PensOnly.com (Pens)	0	0	0	0.5	0	1	1.5
WD (Flash drives)	0	1	0	0.5	2	2	5.5
Citizen Wolf (Clothing)	0	2 [A, B, C]	1 [A]	0	1	2 [A]	6

Resources

These resources may be useful for evaluating the sustainability of a product or company.

- Good on you (Application) - an application that rates clothing distributors and companies based on their sustainability efforts.
- Know the chain - a resource to evaluate companies on indirect or direct use of forced labour. While this important topic differs slightly from the goals of sustainability, it does trace product and company materials overseas so you can evaluate the true source of the product.
- OCC Apparel - a passionate team of experienced ethical, sustainable and organic branded apparel production experts. Made-to-order branded items available to order.
- Good on you review (2020 October) of ethical and sustainable clothing brands from Australia and NZ.
- Shop Ethical - very thorough compilation of the ethics (or not) of almost any product you can think of. Companies are ranked not just on environmental issues, but also human rights. Much faster than filling in the scorecard matrix if what you want is on there!