

Wake up and smell the carbon

Calculating carbon footprints is not vital to reduce emissions. Taking simple measures can be effective, says *Anthony Judge*

- Companies are using their green credentials and products as marketing tools to gain business
- The Advertising Standards Authority has established guidelines for making environmental claims about products
- Simple measures can be implemented to reduce businesses' environmental impact

Measuring carbon footprints is big business, with marketing and PR agencies using clients' green credentials as marketing tools. Companies are under pressure to show their environmental commitment to customers, staff and the outside world. Measuring carbon footprints, going carbon neutral, and offsetting carbon emissions are seen as good means of demonstrating those green credentials. Many companies in the UK claim carbon neutrality.

The Advertising Standards Authority has introduced guidelines for making environmental claims and investigated a number of complaints. In March, it upheld a complaint against Renault for making unsubstantiated claims.

Carbon free

The government wants all new homes to be zero carbon by 2016 and new non-domestic buildings by 2019. However, its definition of zero carbon is under consultation and does not require the development to take into account the CO₂ produced in construction. It is likely that developers will be allowed to off-set some of the carbon cost of the development off-site or in the emissions trading market, which means that it is not really a zero carbon development. In practice, and depending upon your priorities, the only way to ensure a new building is green is by not building it.

Some organisations are being advised by government agencies and professional bodies that it is essential to measure their carbon footprint if they want to reduce their effect on the environment. But surely this can be done without the need to measure?

Companies used to declare themselves carbon neutral by purchasing early EU allowances, which had a notional carbon value and, in carbon saving terms, were practically worthless because too many permits were issued. However, it enabled them to donate to a supposedly good cause and generate good PR, without having to tackle the effect they were having on the

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environment. Was this the modern equivalent of selling indulgences?

In practice, it is difficult for individuals or organisations with a limited carbon footprint to know where their money is being spent or, perhaps more importantly, whether it is being spent on a project that otherwise would not have occurred. There are recognised standards of how to measure carbon footprints and establish what carbon neutral means; and reputable organisations advise reducing carbon footprints as part of the carbon neutral process. The Carbon Trust Standard was launched in June, focussing on carbon reduction rather than offsetting.

Another popular way of improving environmental credentials without changing behaviour is for organisations to use their business clout to impose green requirements on those that they deal with. It is routine for large organisations to ask suppliers and professional advisers to provide details of their policy on environmental matters before contracts are renewed or appointments confirmed. Landlords are beginning to impose "green leases" on their tenants.

For some, the carbon footprint/carbon neutral exercise may be a smoke screen to make it look as if they care about the environment. In practice, it might be as good to spend time and money on simple energy- and resource-saving measures in office buildings and company practices.

Simple measures

Measures can be taken to reduce an organisation's effect on the environment without the need to measure that effect in the first place. However, the Climate Change Bill will require most companies, including developers, surveyors and property managers, to carry out a measurement of their emissions. With this and the government's Carbon Reduction Commitment, which will affect some organisations, early movers may be pleased to have set in place simple behavioural changes.

Since implementing our environmental management system in 2003, we have adopted a variety of practical measures such as switching off lights, computers, printers and mobile phone chargers when not in use, installing efficient boilers and chillers, using electronic filing systems, and installing low energy light bulbs and water filtering and bottling systems. These can be implemented easily without having to calculate footprints or pay for offsets. They might not generate as much marketing publicity or give PR firms a warm fuzzy feeling inside, but you can be certain that you are having a direct effect on the environment.

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