

Carbon Labels

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This has been a busy year for the greening of retail. We've had Plan A, fair-trade bananas, MSC fish, ethical bags and wind turbines and many retailers have clearly recognised that their customers want to shop in places where such important environmental issues are taken seriously.

For some retailers, carbon labels are the way forward. Tesco's commitment to place a carbon label on every product is huge. They are not alone, Walkers Crisps and Botanic Shampoo being the first to use the Carbon Trust label. But is it the best decision?

Anyone living or working in London will have seen the Mayor's green lifestyle campaign. One poster asks us to avoid over filling our kettle. This is a fair challenge, but it also raises a smile of irony. I have visions of that conscientious green householder taking his one cup of fair-trade, organic tea outdoors. He relaxes under his roaring patio heater. In just 30 minutes it has emitted the same amount of carbon as boiling 200 cups of tea!

My question is this - would those 200 cups of tea be covered by the carbon label on the patio heater? How can it - some only do a few hours work a year's work, whilst others, like the one outside my local pub will burn most nights!

Wyevale Garden Centres announced in April that it was not going to re-order any more

gas powered patio heaters and would phase out sales of the product entirely. Wyevale did not need the expense of a thorough embedded footprint assessment. The arguments and usage numbers were bad enough. Last week that decision was vindicated by the Energy Saving Trust's report. Their recommendation was clear - retailers should not offer them.

I welcome the interest shown by the retailers' interest in embedded carbon and the Carbon Trust must be congratulated for helping develop a methodology to measure it. But sadly a customer facing label might not as helpful as many believe. It is good that they have heightened the debate but I wonder if there is a more basic choice we need to consider.

The evidence from the UK Roundtable on Sustainable Consumption research was clear, customers expect retailers to make some of the bold decisions. Labelling helps but there are some obvious choices which need editing out. Patio heaters are a good place to start.

There is increasing awareness of where the big carbon hits are. It's about how we use our car, how well we insulate and use energy in our home and the food we eat - with dairy and beef under the spotlight. If every company devoted their energy to the big or easy win - the classic 20-80 rule - I am sure we would save more carbon than overwhelming people with information which is difficult to interpret and use.