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# IT and the Environment: Part 1

## How green is your supplier?

By David Tebbutt, January 2008

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### In a nutshell:

Public sentiment is starting to drive companies into action. Actions speak louder than words

### Key points:

- Image, customer pressure and money are the key motivators, not protecting the planet;
  - Company strategies tend to be global so may take time to make 'new' impact near you;
  - It is perfectly legitimate to start asking for proof of 'doing the right thing';
  - ISO accreditation and the Carbon Disclosure Project can help with opinion-forming.
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Call it green, call it sustainability, call it environment, the name doesn't matter. The fact is that the general public has now become agitated about the issue with the result that companies have to respond. Various bits of legislation that exist now, and which are coming down the track, are bringing the issues into even sharper focus.

As IT professionals you have a responsibility to ensure that you optimise your own operations' impact on the environment. But it's a challenge to figure out where best to apply resources for the greatest impact. Do you invest in upgrading the data centre? Or do you provide new services to the organisation which enable it to reduce its own environmental impact?

According to research from Chatsworth Communications, environmental protection is not what motivates companies to adopt green policies. The top three motivators appear to be image, then customer pressure, then money.

Essentially, public companies don't have consciences; their primary concern is to deliver a return to their shareholders. It may be that this is best done by very publicly 'going green', thereby attracting customer loyalty. Or it may be by slashing energy-related costs. The environmental benefits are more or less a side-issue to increased profits or reduced costs.

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As a prelude to more discussions about the environmental impact opportunities for IT, Freeform Dynamics decided to see what 10 major suppliers had to say on the subject. After all, one of the key elements of a green strategy is to ensure that all participants in the supply chain share the same commitments.

The first thing to note is that vendors' green strategies are generally global. This means that different countries will react in different ways. At risk of offending people in two countries, readers

based in Germany might be astonished to see companies bragging about their recycling activities while Americans might find it quite radical.

IBM boasts about its environmental programme being initiated in 1967 - long before even Small is Beautiful was written by E.F. Schumacher and also before some of the other companies in the top list were even founded. HP started product recycling in 1987 and Apple found its environmental feet in 1990. (I remember taking a briefing shortly afterwards in an office high in the Apple building, from which you could clearly see a brown photochemical haze enveloping Silicon Valley.)

It's also interesting to note the terminology used by different companies. It may reflect a natural caution by the corporate communications department. On the other hand, it might represent an attempt to mislead. If in doubt, do seek clarification.

More or less all companies talk of their commitment to something or other. Ignore that. What matters is what they're actually doing. Some say that they have policies. Again, that's very nice, but they need to have followed it with actions. So look out for active verbs, "we provide", "we conserve", "we lessen", and so on.

You can disregard "we meet all applicable government requirements." They have to, it's the law. However, if the most stringent requirements are met company-wide, then this is a good sign. Some say that they "exceed" their legal obligations. Cisco, for example, says: "Our programmes extend beyond environmental compliance...", and then explains how. This is clearly a better approach than simply meeting legal obligations.

The extreme of environmental friendliness is to return more value to the environment than is taken out. A negative carbon footprint, if you like. And no cheating by purchasing carbon credits. The Cradle to Cradle approach advocates the reuse of waste in components of equal or higher value to those from which it was recovered. That's a tough call, but some companies are trying to achieve such genuine sustainability.

A lot of companies claim to be doing the right thing, but it only applies to part of their operations. If they rely more on anecdotes than policies, plus proof, then they're possibly greenwashing and need to be checked out. ISO accreditations - 9000 and 14001 - are a good sign that they actually do have the right processes in place.

One of the problems is that even the best companies talk of visions, goals and commitments. While such public assertions are admirable, they're no substitute for measurable objectives or real evidence. Look for a 'take-back' story. Companies that do this generally give figures and, more importantly, achieve control of the recycling process thus optimising its effectiveness.

Finally, the Carbon Disclosure Project is a good place to check out most of your suppliers. They are asked to report their activities related to climate change. The volume and completeness of reporting speaks volumes. It also provides a more independent and structured view of their activities than declarations on the companies' own web sites.

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