

Ranking Exposes Industry's Invisibility

Everyone likes to check out rankings, right? In late September, I was browsing the magazine racks at my local Borders bookstore when *Newsweek's* Sept. 28 cover on the greenest big companies in America caught my eye. Each company was given a score for environmental impact, green policies, reputation, green, and greenhouse gases. Call me naïve but I thought for sure at least a few paper and packaging companies would be found in this list.

Hewlett-Packard topped the list. As I turned the pages I saw *no* paper companies. Where were they? Finally, I saw Sonoco, Hartsville, S.C., at number 94. It was the only paper company in the top 100. (International Paper came in next at 344).

I called Sonoco's Derrick Trader, the point person for the company's consumer packaging sustainability program, to see if I could learn why the company did so well in the rankings, which took a year for *Newsweek* and three research companies to develop. One of the key points that he made was that Sonoco has a culture of sustainability that goes back years. It was sustainable long before sustainability became the buzzword it is today.

And guess what *Newsweek* said about HP? It earned the title of greenest company in America largely because of decisions it made years ago, including PC-recycling and reducing packaging materials.

Another advantage Sonoco has over its paper peers is the breathe of its offerings. It can consult with customers and come up with the best packaging format that goes beyond just paper (think film and foil).

But the biggest reason for Sonoco's success in this "green" ranking is its ability to increase its visibility and maintain its credibility. If there's one problem that the paper and paperboard industry continues to wrestle with every day it is its visibility. It should never assume consumers understand how sustainable it really is.

This isn't to say that the corrugated container and folding carton industries aren't making the effort. Just look at current "The Responsible Package" campaign by the Paperboard Packaging Alliance and the Corrugated Packaging Alliance. It will raise the awareness of the paper-based packaging industry's sustainable practices and the responsibly made products it supplies.

Let's face it: The American consumer takes all kinds of paper packaging for granted. It doesn't know that 6 percent of U.S. manufacturing gross domestic product comes from the forest products industry or that 57.4 percent of all paper consumed in the U.S. is recycled.

Newsweek's greenest big companies ranking will be an annual event. So how can more paper and packaging companies end up on this list next year, even if they don't crack the top 100? Persistence. Campaigns like "The Responsible Package" can't be one-shot deals that fade away in a few months so keep banging the drum. Don't give up. It's a slow process but more and more people, especially young people, will recognize all the good, sustainable ways that paper and paperboard packaging serves their lives.

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