

It started with a few eco-products...

*Urban Community of Dunkerque,
France*

Getting started can be the hardest step. The range of opportunities is big and running the risk of the green products eventually not being accepted seems too heavy a burden to carry, so there is no clear point where to begin. Without any experience at all, it may also be hard to convince one's colleagues.

The present chapter describes how the Communauté Urbaine de Dunkerque started its efforts by concentrating on only a few eco-products.

Background

Dunkerque is located in France and has 70,000 inhabitants, the Communauté also including the direct surroundings, which make up for another 210,000 inhabitants. At the end of the 1980s, economic difficulties affecting the two main local industries, metallurgy and shipbuilding, led to a high unemployment rate which had severe impacts on the economic, social and urban life of the City.

The Urban District, Region and French State reacted to this situation by joining forces in an approach combining the economic and social development, urban project and environment. The municipality installed an environmental department and the City set about conducting a Local Agenda 21. In 1996, Dunkerque received the European Award for Sustainable Cities.

Strategy and objectives

The use of more environmentally friendly products is one of the activities initiated within the framework of Dunkerque's sustainable development project.

Starting with three target items – cleaning products, paper and paints – the objective is to use a maximum of products not only presenting ecological but also social qualities, such as “fairly traded” goods.

Successful introduction of eco-products

The environmental department developed a six-step methodology for the introduction of greener products in its administration. This methodology (see box 6 below on “recycled paper”) is applied to each target product which should be purchased green.



The offices of the “Communauté Urbaine de Dunkerque”, France



Municipal staff use recycled paper, Dunkerque, France



Step One: Ask usual suppliers for environmentally preferable products.

About 20 suppliers of recycled paper have been contacted in the Dunkerque region and at the national level. Their addresses could be found in an annual guide “Buying recycled products”¹, and by contacting several paper mills. Each supplier could offer between one and several recycled papers containing 50 to 100 % recycled materials.

The suppliers had no experience at all with administrations demanding recycled paper. Some of them did not know the official eco-labels and indicated that recycled paper was much more expensive than virgin paper, which is not always true.

Step Two: Inform and raise awareness among employees as to the objectives and conditions of the change and the employees’ role in it.

The employees and head of the reprography services were orally informed about the proposed use of recycled paper. The head of the printing service was already willing to use recycled paper and aware of the problems which might occur in the copy machines when using this kind of paper. It was suggested he test different sorts of recycled paper.

Some of your colleagues already are in favour of using eco-products. Find and contact them in order to involve them in your green purchasing project.

Step Three: Test the eco-product samples over a few months in order to assess their efficiency, quality and user friendliness and compare them to conventional equivalents.

In Dunkerque, the copy department tested at least one ream of each kind of recycled paper. All the results proved positive.

Step Four: Elaborate a diagnosis from the test results.

The recycled paper to best suit the needs of the Urban Community of Dunkerque was chosen according to the following five aspects:

- Copier/printer compatibility
- Eco-label
- Content of recycled elements
- Price-performance ratio
- Shade of colour

Step Five: Introduce a purchasing procedure aimed at progressively replacing conventional products by eco-products.

First, several documents (fliers, internal information sheets) were printed on recycled paper and distributed to all municipal services. Then, a stock of 400 reams was left with the copy service to be used by all employees of the urban district.

When first introducing the eco-product, employees were not informed of the paper being a recycled one, in order to avoid a priori reactions. Nobody realised that they were using recycled paper.

Step Six: Communicate the results in the municipal newsletter.

“...the most important result has been obtained in the use of recycled paper. At least half of the 77 kg of paper used every day in the municipal administration is of recycled origin. With the same quality and a cheaper price (3 Francs per ream), that was worth it. The goal of the Mission Environment and Sustainable Development for the year 2000 is to increase recycled paper rates up to 100%.”

Translated from InterCOM, n°46, Feb. 2000 (Internal magazine addressing the employees of the Urban Community of Dunkerque)

Box 6: The six step methodology developed by Dunkerque for green purchasing

¹ „Les produits recyclés, catalogue 99: Prendre aujourd’hui les bonnes décisions pour demain en achetant des produits fabriqués à partir des matières recyclées“, more information at <http://www.produitsrecyles.com>



Finances and resources used

The environmental department is responsible for initiating the above mentioned actions, carrying out the tests and following up the action with the concerned municipal services. One person is employed full-time to research, test, initiate and support technical services on new projects.

The overall work on eco-products is carried out in co-operation with the French Ministry of the Environment, the French Agency for Energy and the Environment (ADEME), an employment agency, the regional association of local authorities and consultancy firms.

Results

For the three tested product groups – paper, cleaning products and paint – the concerned units chose eco-products of a particular brand showing the same quality as the conventional products previously used.

It could be proven that recycled paper no longer provokes dysfunction in printers or copy machines, as opposed to what several French municipalities had previously experienced, and it is cheaper than conventional paper. The price difference is of about half a Euro per ream, which corresponds to savings of 16%, approximately.

Therefore, Dunkerque's

procurement of recycled paper keeps increasing as shown in figure 3.

The municipality of Dunkerque purchases three categories of paper: simple for everyday use, medium for colour copies and high quality for important mail. The percentage of recycled paper used in the first category currently amounts to 60 to 65%. The aim was to increase this to 80 to 100% by the year 2000.

Eco-products can have a better price-performance ratio than conventional products and in the long run do not prove more expensive. Thus, it may even happen that preference is given to an eco-product rather for its functional than its environmental qualities, just because they prove better than the conventional product's features, such as quick drying, good wearing resistance or the less harmful effects of eco-paints on users' health. For these reasons, some departments of the urban district took the initiative on their own to procure eco-products.

Barriers and difficulties

Dunkerque experienced several difficulties in the first step to green its purchases:

- For some product groups, suppliers are not easy to be found, and there is a lack of information about eco-labels.
- Purchasers have difficulties in differentiating and assessing the guarantees given by the many different eco-labels.

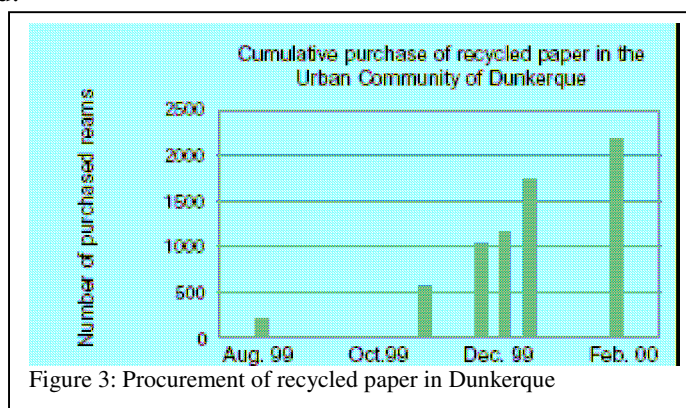


Figure 3: Procurement of recycled paper in Dunkerque



- Municipal employees have a negative view of recycled products and lack information concerning their quality and characteristics.

One important restriction to expanding green purchasing in Dunkerque is seen in French legislation regarding public markets. The legal principles of transparency, non-discrimination and equal treatment are perceived to require that green products have, at least, the same level of price and quality as competing products while discriminating the use of environmental or social issues as a first selection criterion.

Future plans

The Urban Community of Dunkerque systematically fights those difficulties by innovative approaches and keeps working with enthusiasm to extend the purchase of eco-products to other areas, including office furniture and catering.

Transferability

This is Dunkerque's message to other European municipalities:

„It is not very difficult to apply the methodology we developed for the introduction of greener products in the municipal administration. If you still do not find the excellent functional qualities of modern eco-products convincing, just test them!“

Dunkerque's methodology is easily transferable to a municipality where a few people are committed to environmental issues and one person is ready to promote green purchasing.



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