

5 Questionnaires, an easy way for identifying green products - Kolding, Denmark



The castle of Kolding, Denmark

Purchasing officers, as a rule, have never been trained to identify the environmental criteria related to their procurement activities. This lack of scientific knowledge makes them hesitate to apply environmental criteria to the products and services they purchase.

The following chapter describes how this problem can be overcome by having the environmental department specify environmental criteria in a way that they can easily be applied by the purchasing department. Questionnaires are the key to success.

5.1 Background

Kolding is a Danish city with 61,000 inhabitants. In 1994, its Town Council unanimously signed the Aalborg Charter and thereby committed the municipality to actively work towards a local implementation of the Rio Conference goals of sustainable development.

This commitment was confirmed in the Municipal Plan (1998–2009), which includes, as one of its five focus areas, the “green business” role of Kolding and obliges the municipality to strengthen its environmental efforts through environmental management and monitoring, green planning and purchasing. With around 6,000 employees, the municipality is the largest single business enterprise in the region.

5.2 Strategy and objectives

Kolding’s purchasing strategy is to ecologically reset its purchasing actions and integrate them in the City’s environmental management. Its aim is that the environmental criteria be assessed on a par with price, quality or level of service in tendering procedures.

As a tool for fulfilling this strategy, environmental questionnaires were designed. Since 1998, they have been developed for a wide range of product groups (wipe cloths, copy and printing paper, copy, fax and printing machines, office furniture and items, personal aids such as diapers, gloves, support stockings and breast prostheses, textiles, laundering textiles, food and toys).

5.3 Environmental questionnaires

The questionnaires were designed by qualified staff from the environmental department who closely co-operated with the central purchasing department in this matter. During their extensive research on environmental impacts of products and production processes, the developers used several sources of information, i.e. publications, Web sites as well as reports from international and national environmental organisations, such as the Danish Environmental Protection Agency (DEPA) and the criteria standards set by the Nordic Eco-labelling Council.

All questionnaires, such as the one presented in box 8, have the following structure:

- A preliminary question about the compliance of the product with environmental requirements such as the ones set by the EU or the Nordic Eco-label. If the answer is YES, the environmental impact of the product is directly and positively assessed. If the answer is NO, the supplier has to answer the following questions:

A structured tool

- General questions about the environmental quality of the supplier's business.
- Questions regarding the product's environmental impact.
- Questions regarding the environmental impact of the product's package.
- Assessment, a part of the questionnaire explaining to the purchaser how to interpret the answers provided by the supplier.

Kolding environmental criteria for office furniture

In this context, office furniture are desks, bookshelves, conference tables, chairs, swivel chairs, computer tables and other items to be used in an office.

To assess the environmental impact of the product the following questions are asked. Questions must be answered with yes or no, and positive answers must be detailed.

Preliminary questions

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|---|-----|----|
| 1. Which country of origin does the wood come from? | | |
| 2. Which kind of primary energy sources are used for electricity and heating? | | |
| 3. Can the product in question, or part of it, comply with demands similar to the environmental demands of the Nordic Ecolabelling "Svanen" (Swan) or the EU eco-labelling? | YES | NO |

Questions No. 1 to 3 must be answered. If 3 is answered with yes, no further questions. If 3 is answered with No, please answer the following questions:

1. General questions

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|---|-----|----|
| 1. Does the business have a policy of transport in the intention of reducing the impact of CO2 (e.g. by increasing load per truck, less transports, using alternative energy sources or forms of transportation)? | YES | NO |
| 2. Is the business certified according to ISO 14001 or EMAS? | YES | NO |
| 3. Does the business prepare a yearly green account? | YES | NO |
| 4. Does the business have a waste policy as to waste sorting, increased use of recycled materials, and reducing waste amounts? | YES | NO |
| 5. Does the business comply with the environmental demands of the local authority? | YES | NO |

2. Questions regarding the environmental impact

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|---|-----|----|
| 1. Is the product made of renewable resources? | YES | NO |
| 2. Are recycled materials part of the product? | YES | NO |
| 3. Can the product be repaired, and will spare parts be available for a long time? | YES | NO |
| 4. Can the product, or part of it, be recycled? | YES | NO |
| 5. Can the product be separated into its single components? | YES | NO |
| 6. Does the product have a long lifespan in comparison with similar products? | YES | NO |
| 7. Can the product be cleaned easily with water and ordinary soap? | YES | NO |
| 8. Does the wood used come from sustainable forestry complying with FSC guidelines (Forest Stewardship Council)? | YES | NO |
| 9. Is the product produced without any use of organic solvents? | YES | NO |
| 10. Is the product produced without the use of heavy metal containing compounds? | YES | NO |
| 11. Is the product produced without adding chemicals from the "List of Undesirable Substances" from the Danish Environmental Protection Agency? | YES | NO |
| 12. Is the product produced without the use of PVC containing plastics? | YES | NO |
| 13. Are screws, plates and other metallic parts made without aluminium? | YES | NO |
| 14. Are screws, plates and other metallic parts made without chrome? | YES | NO |
| 15. Are screws, plates and other metallic parts made without nickel? | YES | NO |

3. Questions regarding the packaging of the product

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| 1. Is the packaging without chemicals from the “List of Undesirable Substances” from the Danish Environmental Protection Agency? | YES | NO |
| 2. The packaging is produced without the use of PVC containing plastics? | YES | NO |
| 3. The product is delivered unpacked or with only minimal packing means? | YES | NO |
| 4. The packaging is made of recycled or recyclable materials? | YES | NO |

4. Assessing the environmental impact (only for purchasers' use)

The more questions answered with yes, the more environmentally friendly the product. Minimum requirements for a product to be regarded as environmentally compatible are answering the following questions with YES:

1. General questions: No. 4,
2. Questions on environmental impact: No. 6, 8, 10, 11 and 12
3. Questions as to package: No. 1 and 2

Box 8: Kolding environmental criteria for office furniture

Environmental assessment

The questions are formulated in a way that positive answers, for which details have to be given, indicate positive environmental performance. For every product group, there is a set of mandatory questions, which, if negatively answered, exclude the bidder from the tendering process. All other questions provide the basis for comparing the product's environmental standards with the help of a scoring system.

5.4 Results

Within two years, Kolding managed to specify and integrate environmental demands in 40% of all calls for tender issued, i.e. 19 questionnaires, four of which are available in English. By the year 2002, the municipality will increase this rate up to 100% and will then have completely fulfilled the green purchasing policy, as set out in the Municipal Plan.

Barriers and conflicts

Two kinds of difficulties have been encountered in the design phase of the questionnaires. First, the availability of information regarding the contents and manufacturing processes of some products and, second, the application of environmental criteria to production methods and to the use of national eco-labels. Indeed, Government Procurement Agreements and EU legislation, on behalf of the free market and equal opportunities principles, forbid purchasers to:

- Impose environmental demands on production processes as this is considered to be discriminating.
- Demand eco-labelled products in connection with EU tenders.
- Attach any importance to the environmental impact of transportation processes, which implies that if two suppliers offer the same prices and environmental factors, the nearest supplier cannot be chosen just for simple environmental reasons.

Those questions are currently discussed within the national and European regulatory bodies.

Lessons learned

Beyond those difficulties, Kolding's experience has, so far, proved two things:

- Suppliers react positively to the environmental inquiry and easily fulfil the requirements.
- It could be disproved that the range of green products available on the market is insufficient and too expensive. Except for the field of organic food, additional expenses could be overcompensated by centralising procurement activities.

Transferability

Kolding's method and the underlying questionnaires can be used as a basis for green purchasing in other European municipalities as well. The creation of environmental questionnaires would prove easy for big municipalities, which already have environmental expertise.

The lack of environmental expertise and the limited number of eco-labelled (particularly "EU flower") products might hinder small municipalities from implementing this method, which in a long term perspective should be co-ordinated at the national level and enriched by international exchange. The companies would then no longer have to face additional work in order to document the environmental qualities of their products for each specific command.

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