

# Why Recycling *is not* Enough

Designing for sustainability  
can help you grow your business  
and expand your skill set.

by Laurel Saville



## Proactively green

When Celery Design created this volume of guidelines for building environmentally responsible multifamily housing, they incorporated sustainable thinking into the book itself. Says Celery's Brian Dougherty, "One big design objective was that this be interesting and approachable so busy architects and developers would take the time to read it. We varied materials and colors throughout and included several structural innovations."

# DESIGNERS ARE UNIQUELY POSITIONED TO HAVE AN ENORMOUS POSITIVE IMPACT, NOT ONLY ON THE PROJECT AT HAND, BUT ON SHAPING THEIR CLIENTS' THINKING AROUND SUSTAINABILITY.



## Eco-smart features

Among the waste-saving attributes of the building guide-lines book are tabbed chapter dividers (shown above and below) made from diecut cover stock with the tab facing away from the outer edge of the divider page. The reader folds the tabs over so they extend beyond the edge. Divider page stock is Fraser Genesis post-consumer recycled. Additional features: The manual's cover is printed on 100 percent recycled chipboard; interior pages are printed two-color on Neenah Environment 100 percent post-consumer recycled. One spot color was varied for each chapter.

Designers often lament their reactive role when it comes to creating: Clients identify their needs, and designers execute on these demands. As Marc Alt, a designer, board member of AIGA-New York, and chair of the Grow: Design for Sustainability conference, points out, "Designers have traditionally been looked at as service providers, hired to make something look good but not to get involved in the heavy lifting or heavy thinking."

But when it comes to making materials with the environment in mind, designers are uniquely positioned to have an enormous positive impact, not only on the project at hand, but on shaping their clients' thinking around sustainability.

According to Don Carli, senior research fellow with the Institute for Sustainable Communication, who collaborated with Alt in developing the Grow conference, "Key aspects of design for sustainability are analysis of the unseen life-cycle impacts of a product or service and the development of a 'triple bottom line' business case for a design solution. Designers are beginning to address these issues, and when they do, the results can be visually inspiring, world changing, and good for business."

As designers increasingly bring ideas about green design to the table, along with their mock-ups and storyboards, they're finding that thinking and acting in a more sustainable way need not be an expensive, academic, or complicated exercise. There are simple and practical steps a designer can take to help reduce environmental impact, while creating innovative, high-performing, and beautiful materials.

With the help of some forward-looking designers, we've compiled 11 strategies for getting started.

## 1. Educate yourself, educate your clients.

To make greener decisions, it's important to understand the entire life cycle of materials and processes used in printed materials. Because paper manufacturing, printing, and shipping are so resource intensive, there are many choices to be made along the continuum of producing, packaging, and getting materials to the end user.

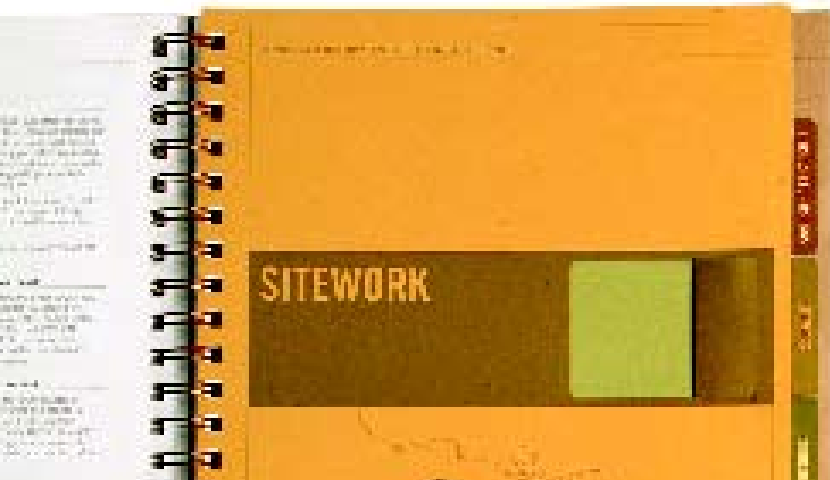
Get started by using the many resources available on the internet, some listed at the end of this article. Also, read books, attend conferences, and look into industries that are a few steps ahead, like green building design. Phil Hamlett, MFA director in the school of graphic design at the Academy of Art University in San Francisco and producer of the AIGA-San Francisco Compostmodern conference, is joining forces with Alt to create an AIGA "community of interest" on sustainability. They're developing a website for AIGA that will offer online tools to provide ideas, simplify issues, and make implementing sustainable practices easier. "We plan on eventually reaching out to include sustainable design discussions in related fields such as packaging, product design, and the built environment," Alt says.

## 2. Beware the simple answer.

The world of sustainable practices has its share of misconceptions and myths. As Hamlett points out, "It's very complicated, the way that printing impinges on the environment, and few graphic designers understand the process."

For example, Cenvo Anderson Lithograph (see Recommended Resources, page 49) offers a three-page discussion comparing soy to conventional inks. Included is a list of six properties that must be considered before an ink can be dubbed environmentally friendly: It must reduce emissions, create less toxic waste, use a renewable resource, be easily de-inked, produce less hazardous sludge, and be more biodegradable than conventional ink.

When choosing papers, look beyond recycled content and consider recyclability, raw materials, and how the paper is bleached and manufactured. Packing and shipping are also important to think about. You can eat up a lot of environmental gains by letting materials be packed in oversized, high-virgin content containers and trucked long distances.



# DESIGN DECISIONS LIKE REDUCING THE NUMBER OF COLORS YOU USE TO PRINT A JOB IS BETTER ON THE ENVIRONMENT AS WELL AS YOUR CLIENT'S BUDGET.

## 3. Change the design paradigm.

Chris Hacker, an industrial designer and vice president of design and design strategy at Johnson & Johnson, encourages designers to step up instead of waiting for clients to take the lead on sustainability. “You should just do business this way,” he says. “It’s a state of mind where you think from the very beginning of the design process about ways to make it more sustainable.”

Brian Dougherty of Celery Design echoes the sentiment. “Much of your power as a designer is in how you define your role. We don’t ask for special permission to do great design, and we take the same approach with materials. Recycled content is just one of the ways we define what makes a good paper.”

Instead of simply accepting the suggested size for a printed piece, consider what size will result in the least waste on press. Instead of specing an easy-to-find, standard material that happens to release VOCs (volatile organic compounds), make progressive material choices part of your initial presentation. Sustainable choices can be included as just one of many design considerations.

## 4. Ask some new questions.

One of Alt’s most critical take-aways from the Grow conference was rethinking design’s traditional approach: “Designing for sustainability requires developing a functional aesthetic to balance and integrate with the visual aesthetic that dominates design thinking today.”

He recommends questioning many day-to-day design assumptions—for example, assuming that offset printing is always the best choice. Offset lithography results in a lot of waste. One alternative, digital printing, produces very specific quantities for less waste. What’s more, digital print runs can happen in smaller batches, closer to material distribution, saving packing materials and fossil fuels.

Hacker, who before joining Johnson & Johnson worked for environmental leader Aveda, suggests asking before you design, specify, or buy anything:

- Do we need it? Can we live without it?
- Is the project designed to minimize waste?
- Can it be smaller, lighter, or made from fewer materials?

- Is it designed to be durable or multifunctional?
- Does it use renewable resources?
- Is reuse practical and encouraged?
- Are the product and packaging refillable, recyclable, or repairable?
- Is it made with post-consumer recycled or reclaimed materials? How much?
- Are the materials available in a less toxic form? Can it be made with less toxic materials?
- Are materials available from a socially and environmentally responsible company?
- Is it made locally?

## 5. Don’t assume it’s more expensive.

Going green saves dollars, as well as the environment. For example, retail behemoth Wal-Mart is rewarding vendors that reduce packaging because less packaging translates into lower cost. Johnson & Johnson is eliminating PVC packaging in favor of other more sustainable materials including R-PET, a form of plastic that can be up to 10 percent less expensive since it’s part of a huge recycling stream.

Design decisions like reducing the number of colors you use to print a job is better on the environment as well as your client’s budget. As Hacker points out, “If you put the environmental paradigm at the start of the project, then you can build it into the budget. So if you pay a little more for paper, you can pay a little less for something somewhere else.”

## 6. Point out that everyone is doing it.

Companies large and small are increasingly considering their social, environmental, and financial bottom lines and being rewarded by investors and consumers for their actions. Hamlett notes, “Large consumer brands are experiencing a tectonic shift in the way that they look at the world, and this is going to make it easier for graphic designers to bring these topics to the forefront with their clients.”

From the emergence of “carbon markets” that allow parties to offset their environmental impact by paying for CO<sub>2</sub> neutralization, to companies of all sizes and across all industries making triple bottom line considerations part of their corporate practices and messaging, designers can remind their clients that good environmental policies are good business.

## More sustainable projects from Celery Design:

**1. Elephant Pharmacy,** a new “natural” pharmacy chain, successfully launched its first store with an unusual direct-mail campaign. Celery imagined the project as an opportunity to give a small gift—a fresh flower and samples of health and wellness products—to 30,000 potential customers. The package was two-color printed on Fox River Evergreen 100 percent recycled paper and recycled industrial chipboard.

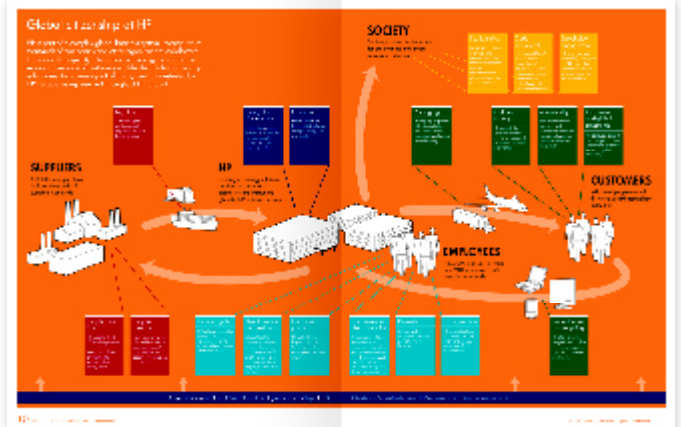
**2. This 2006 *Global Citizenship Report*** highlights Hewlett Packard’s corporate social responsibility program. One environmentally friendly aspect: The 24-page brochure is a summary of the full report, online at [www.hp.com/go/report](http://www.hp.com/go/report).

**3. Fox River Paper’s *The Nature of Paper*** brochure is an informative overview of environmental issues related to paper. The text is broken into 10 actions designers can take to make a positive impact. It was six-color printed with low-VOC inks.

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#### 1. EARTHWORKS ENVIRONMENT

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The first step is to identify the sources of post-consumer recycled fiber. This is a goal we are working towards. The first step is to identify the sources of post-consumer recycled fiber. This is a goal we are working towards.

WATER

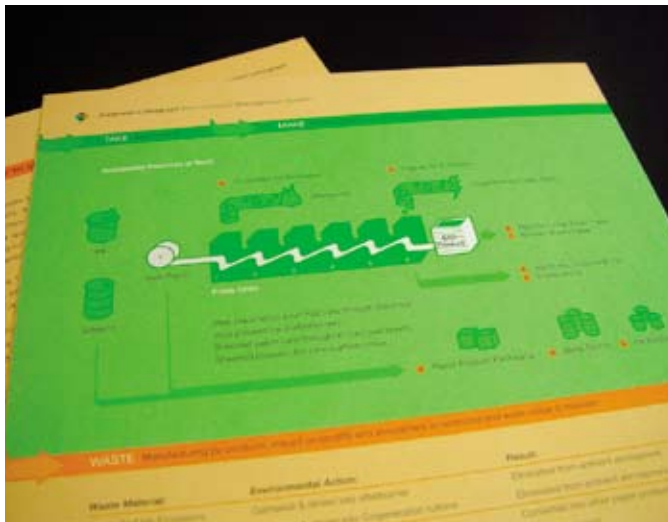
ENERGY

PAPER

### Eco-inserts

Cenveo Anderson Litho has made substantial investments in its plants' ambient environment and waste processing ... investments that improved the company's efficiency even as they raised its public profile and made it more attractive as a business partner and supplier. A series of advertising inserts (one is shown

at right) was created to promote the printer's commitments to responsible printing practices. Art director and writer Phil Hamlett and designer Kelly Conley emphasized bold, punchy headlines in the inserts to bring the printer's "green side" to potential customers. Location photography was by Dwight Eschliman ([www.eschliman.com](http://www.eschliman.com)).



### Depth of commitment

The environmental capabilities mailer for Cenveo Anderson Lithograph at left and below embodies the printer's practices through content and design. Papers chosen were either recycled or waste stock—hence the project's title, "This Is Trash." In addition, it's a self-mailer: "The diecut shell folds into itself," says Hamlett, "so there's no need for

an envelope." Hamlett, who art directed and wrote the piece (Conley designed it), points out that corporations are increasingly informing their stakeholders and the public about their own commitments to sustainable practices. "This kind of promotion gives a printer a competitive edge because the customer then can say their materials are produced responsibly."



### Trash or treasure?

Interior sheets are Monadnock Astrolite PC 100, a 100 percent post-consumer paper. The shell is actual printer make-ready sheets that would otherwise be disposed of. "We're giving them one more tour of duty," says Hamlett.



## 7. Shout it out.

Clients also need to know that good environmental policies make good public relations. Hacker tells the story of a vendor he worked with to develop a new capability—which they then advertised to new clients—for increasing the recycled content of a certain package.

Even small gestures have an impact. Make note of the green steps taken to produce a brochure or catalog in the credits and small print. Or better yet, put it in big print. Use the recycled content logo when and where appropriate. Specify paper from Mohawk's Windpower Portfolio, and you can include a unique logo they've developed for use on printed materials.

The more that clients and audiences talk about green, the more acceptable and commonplace being green will become.

## 8. Choose partners, not products.

Lots of paper companies use post-consumer waste. But did you know that Mohawk is the only paper mill and one of very few manufacturing facilities in the country to use non-polluting wind energy? Lots of printing companies offer low VOC inks, but did you know that Cenveo Anderson Lithograph has a comprehensive environmental management system?

Help clients find eco-minded vendors. As Dougherty says, "Once you engage the client in a collaborative relationship, they see that everyone is trying to accomplish the same things. You're no longer an evangelizer, but a trusted team member."

And if you can't find a vendor that operates sustainably, try to change the vendor you have. Use Anderson Lithograph's environmental record questionnaire for print suppliers as a start. "Even an in-house designer can figure out a way to develop a company-wide approach to, for example, print buying," notes Alt. "Many printing companies claim that their clients aren't interested in sustainable printing, but if they see a market for sustainable practices, they'll fall in line quickly."

## 9. Make wise material choices.

It used to be that environmentally friendly materials were few and expensive, but no more. As Alt points out, "There are so many options now that you should be looking at life cycle analysis. It used to be a limiting factor on design, but now there are more than enough choices."

Many papers are now made from grasses, cloth, hemp, and other materials. AGI/Klearfold just introduced a PLA plastic folding carton made from corn. Hacker has stopped using binders made from vinyl, turning instead to recycled cardboard and aluminum.

Be sure to ask not just where your materials come from, but how they are produced and where

they are going. Content should be recycled and recyclable. Avoid paper bleached with toxic chemicals, as well as foil stamping, metallic inks, and synthetic adhesives (where these are unavoidable, working with responsible vendors will help). And don't ever rely solely on what the manufacturer tells you—do your own research to get the full story.

## 10. Look for opportunity, not restriction.

Seeking out the most efficient way of producing something should lead to creative solutions. Dougherty has built his design practice around finding more sustainable answers. For example, a client wanted tab dividers, which if produced conventionally leave behind a lot of waste. Instead, he says, "We developed a die that has an internal cut, and then the user folds over the slip of paper that sticks out and creates the tab," he explains. "There's no diecutting waste, it's more interactive, still functional, and the client loved it. We're always looking for things like that."

## 11. Start by being green at home.

"Ask questions about everything you do and look for ways to reduce the footprint of the office itself," says Hacker. A few of his recommendations: "Your own stationery and publications should be printed properly, shouldn't be overly complicated, and should never be sent in a big box made with high virgin content materials. Instead of buying new furniture, buy used furniture, renovate with environmental consciousness, buy recycled carpet."

Many companies that produce things used in offices are stepping up to green. Allsteel office furniture offers seating and panel systems made from renewable resources and recycled as well as recyclable materials. There are plenty of building materials made with high levels of recycled content. Apple Computer recently announced it will take back old computers (any brand) and iPods for recycling. HP also has a recycling program for PCs. Verizon will take back your old cell phones and either recycle or give them to battered women trying to rebuild their lives. There are plenty of other opportunities.

Hamlett says, "It gets down to simply using less stuff and less harmful stuff." And Alt reminds us, "There are all these small gestures that are worth doing. When you create a sustainable environment for yourself, you can't help but let that ethos bleed into the rest of your life and your work." ☺

**Laurel Saville writes articles, essays, short stories, books, white papers, brand strategy, corporate communications, and marketing materials from her home in Albany, N.Y. [www.laurelsaville.com](http://www.laurelsaville.com)**

## Recommended resources

### [www.aiga.org/sustainability](http://www.aiga.org/sustainability)

A wealth of ideas, programs, briefings, and links are presented in this portion of the AIGA website.

### [www.aiga.org/content.cfm/designbusinessandethics](http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm/designbusinessandethics)

Check out the PDF on sustainable print design.

### [www.environmentaldefense.org/home.cfm](http://www.environmentaldefense.org/home.cfm)

Select the Research Tools menu for ideas on reducing environmental impact.

### [www.carbonfund.org](http://www.carbonfund.org)

Information on offsetting carbon emissions for consumers.

### [www.cenveo.com](http://www.cenveo.com)

Cenveo Anderson Litho's site offers plenty of environmental information.

### [www.compostmodern.org](http://www.compostmodern.org)

This West Coast conference is jointly sponsored by the San Francisco chapters of the AIGA and the Industrial Designers Society of America.

### [www.grow.aigany.org](http://www.grow.aigany.org)

Grow: Design for Sustainability is an East Coast conference similar to Compostmodern. Presented by the New York Chapter of AIGA.

### [www.celerydesign.com](http://www.celerydesign.com)

Click on Ecological Design Tools.