SUSTAINABILITY – THE PATH FORWARD

A new sustainable survey, targeted at the print and production industry has been conducted by FuturePrint in partnership with Highcon. Marcus Timson, Co-Founder of EcoPrint, questions this sector's ability to engender real change

Marcus Timson is Co-Founder of FuturePrint and the relaunched EcoPrint event

Looking back on 2022, it's clear that the impact of climate change is more visible than ever. Climate 'naysayers' or those content with burying their heads in the sand, are no longer able to look away from the issues so easily. Taking personal responsibility isn't enough. For years, we have endured empty promises from governments, corporate greenwashing and inconsistent, often performative, sustainability policies and pledges.

FuturePrint and Highcon's new sustainability survey has been conducted to gather meaningful data on the industry's green policies, challenges, strategies and future prospects. Respondents to the survey were made up of 34% print-technology

"Fifty-five per cent of respondents believe that enforcing greener policies differentiates their business from competitors"

businesses, 15% commercial printers, 13% package printers/converters, 8% wide-format/textile printers, 6% functional/industrial printers, 6% brand/marketers and 6% label printers/converters. 34% identified as 'other'.

It's clear from the responses that companies and individuals are often well-intentioned, but the information they are working with can be confusing, misleading or uncertain. This can result in ineffective tools for achieving Net Zero.

Simon Lewis, Vice-President of Marketing at Highcon Systems, comments:

"This survey helps map where industry participants are in terms of their understanding of both the problems and the possible solutions as they relate to the industry, and the status of their action plans to make their own contributions to creating a better and greener sustainable future."

MOTIVATING FACTORS

A key takeaway from the survey is that many companies consider customer perception as a significant driving factor towards sustainable practices. 55% of respondents believe that enforcing greener policies differentiates their business from competitors, resulting in a rise in new customers. A further 34% enforce sustainable practices to avoid negative customer judgement. However, the landscape is evolving – sustainability is moving way beyond a 'nice to have' and, therefore, its days as a differentiator are numbered. Lewis comments in his foreword to the survey: "To the 29 converter respondents who said that being sustainable is differentiating and helps win new customers, I am sorry to disappoint you. That's so last decade – unless you're going to be at the absolute forefront."

While customer perception is unsurprisingly a significant driving force, the most common answer was that being sustainable is simply the right thing to do (56%) and is good business practice (48%). But are companies – and is the industry at large – acting with enough urgency? The number of respondents placing the issue as 'moderately important' or 'not important' to their business or their customers, suggests that we still have some way to go.

A GREENER FUTURE

The research found that the vast majority of respondents (70%) are actively looking for alternative, sustainable materials in their production. This is great news, but the more time-consuming and challenging task – scrutinising and adapting production processes – is the area where the most impact can be felt. Investment in digital-

print and finishing technology correlates with general industry trends of lowering waste, reducing operating costs and meeting demand for smaller runs and faster turnarounds.

"It's clear from the responses that companies and individuals are often well-intentioned"

Yet, despite 58% of companies being aware of the sustainable products and processes on offer, 34% said that they are not familiar with all the sustainable technology on offer. This highlights a damning point – there is a significant disconnect between education and implementing sustainable policies within the industry. Although respondents are aware of the impact the print and production industry can have on the environment, more than a quarter seem unsure of how to put it into practice.

EDUCATIONAL CHALLENGES

As one would expect, there are a myriad of factors hindering companies from implementing green practices and policies. The first is the perceived high cost, with 46% and a further customer demand for lower prices being noted as another leading challenge (31%). This is an educational issue, as businesses face difficulties with accurately calculating the costs of becoming more sustainable.

Interestingly, a common thread throughout this survey pinpoints the uncertainty regarding information from governments and legislative bodies. This is supported by 22% of respondents citing a lack of information from within the print industry and 26% a lack of government direction. Unfortunately, the dearth of both internal and external support, and clarity can feed a vicious circle.

When asked what would make businesses prioritise sustainability more strongly, the majority (60%) answered that they want a better understanding of how to be both profitable and planet friendly. Another 43% called for funding from governments and other sources, and 42% believe that increased legislation and regulation would result in greener priorities.

MOVING FORWARD

53% of companies surveyed, expect their businesses to be making sustainability-driven decisions in five years' time. However, with distrust in information sources, it is clear that there needs to be a further emphasis on education and clarity from governments. Peer learning is a powerful tool when it comes to making a change within an industry. There also needs to be a clear path to how they get to a point where these decisions are being made – the time for lip service and non-committal pledges has long since passed.

"To achieve 2030 Net-Zero goals, there is no doubt that governments need to take much more decisive action"

With 62% of respondents interested in participating and/or attending an event entirely focused on sustainable-print technology production, there is a demand for education from within the industry. Events such as this year's EcoPrint Summit in Geneva, Switzerland will showcase sustainability leaders from within and outside the industry who are working towards a more sustainable future and encourage attendees to 'Be the Change'.

CONCLUSION

To achieve 2030 Net-Zero goals, there is no doubt that governments need to take much more decisive action. This in turn will empower industry professionals to make more informed decisions. Although it is clear that brands and end users are the ones driving change and motivating print businesses to embrace more sustainable practices. ■

Marcus Timson is Co-Founder at EcoPrint

EcoPrint is about inspiring the print community to make a change for good

Further information:
tel: +44 771 517 7862
email: marcus.timson@fmfuturenow.com
web: futureprint.tech/ecoprint.events