Summary Report

Consumer attitudes to sustainable electrical products

An assessment of consumer attitudes to sustainable features in electrical products, and the potential influence on purchasing decisions.

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WRAP’s vision is a world without waste, where resources are used sustainably.

We work with businesses and individuals to help them reap the benefits of reducing waste, develop sustainable products and use resources in an efficient way.

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Front cover photograph: Samsung Blue Earth mobile phone, 2009

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Study aim and methodology

Aim of the work

WRAP (Waste & Resources Action Programme) wanted to explore consumer attitudes to the kinds of sustainable attributes in electrical products that are on the market and better understand the key influences on the decision making process to purchasing them. M·E·L Research undertook a qualitative study to help understand these issues.

Eco attributes and product examples

The use of the terms eco or sustainable in electrical products is presented in relation to mainstream products on the market that are described by manufacturers as having sustainable or eco features. This definition however was broad, and the study focussed on products that:

- Reduce or vary the amount of energy used (either by the consumer or by the product).
- Have reduced size or weight.
- Are made for a longer lifetime.
- Are easier to repair.
- Use recycled materials or components.
- Use renewable energy sources (e.g. solar panels).
- Contain less harmful chemicals.
- Are built for easier disassembly to recycle at end of life.
- (To a lesser extent) Use less packaging.

The following products were used in the study to illustrate to participants the range and types of sustainable features that are being produced. The examples were considered to demonstrate a selection of the attributes listed above, these were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Sustainable Attributes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ISE Appliances washing machines</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotpoint Ultima and Aquarius washing machines</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electrolux Ultrasilencer Green vacuum cleaner</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samsung Blue Earth mobile</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sony Ericsson Naite mobile</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sony Bravia WE5 television</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pure Evoke DAB radio</td>
<td>✓ ✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Method for collecting data

Six focus group sessions were held with a range of ages, gender and social groups. Between 8-13 participants attended each session and these took place across three locations in England. In addition, and to provide a realistic environment for considering purchasing decisions, ten accompanied shopping visits took place (5 in stores and 5 online) to view example products and provide insights into purchasing attitudes in a 'real life' situation.

All participants were responsible or jointly responsible for shopping decisions in the household. To provide a range of different attitudes towards environmental considerations, three groups were composed only of people who actively recycle household waste (the ‘pro-environmental’ groups) and three with those who were generally ambivalent to green issues.
Findings

General findings around shopping behaviour

Participants thought that quality is the most significant influence when shopping for electrical products. They are specifically looking to fulfil both a perceived level of reliability and functional specification in the electronic products they select.

After-sales service was the second most significant influence for the ‘pro-environmental’ participants, but price was more important for the other groups.

Environmental considerations were the 10th most significant influence on participants (when presented with a list of 14 factors). The apparent absence of product information about their sustainability of electrics at point of purchase and low consumer understanding more broadly, were major reasons for this lack of conscious influence.

Understanding of eco product attributes

Over all, participants had a very low level of understanding about eco products in general and a narrow view on what it can mean in an electrical product.

Using an interactive group exercise, the research provided some clarification around how the consumers involved conceptualise sustainable or eco attributes in electrical products. Fig 1 illustrates the most commonly used attributes that were spontaneously mentioned by participants, which were generally unprompted. The size of the text represents the significance of the aspects to the groups. The most common theme participants could identify was around reducing packaging with new electrical products. The second most common association was around product usage and energy saving attributes. The majority of discussion was in relation to white goods, and in particular to washing machines.

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Figure 1 Mental mapping of ‘Eco products’ (unprompted understanding)
In contrast, the attributes shown below in Fig 2 generally needed to be prompted to participants as they were not mentioned spontaneously. The level of awareness of recycled content in electrical products was particularly low.

There was some limited appreciation of electrical items having a longer life, although a great deal of scepticism was expressed around this aspect and also around products that are easier to repair. Likewise, people could not readily relate to household electricals being built for ease of disassembly at end of life, and doubted whether refurbishment was even possible:

- “I think that’s actually a joke….even if you come to take it to the tip have you ever known anyone strip a washing machine into different parts, its just pretty impossible isn’t it?” Female

Eco attributes were seen to have more of a ‘natural fit’ with white goods in the focus groups (most specifically washing machines) than with other electrical items. The responses suggested less of a logical fit with other types of devices such as laptop computers or entertainment devices. The exception to this was mobile phones that are seen as a natural progression for innovative or novel new technology, such as the use of solar panels.

The majority of group participants thought that the government should be providing the impetus for driving the development of sustainable products, as opposed to the retailers or manufacturers.
Response to product examples

Appliances that are built for longevity were seen as having some benefits but participants expressed concern about products becoming obsolete, particularly where households might want to replace items more frequently for cosmetic reasons.

Participants questioned the practicality of intelligent energy saving features and how they would be of benefit, since they might challenge established behaviour in the household. For example if a device switched itself off, whether that would be inconvenient. Consumers would welcome more information around energy efficient functions or settings, particularly new technologies and how these types of products could save them money on bills.

The benefits of variable power settings on smaller household appliances such as vacuum cleaners stimulated debate. Participants often showed misunderstanding about how products could deliver an ‘equivalent power’ performance and still save energy. This was largely due to a lack knowledge and experience with products that have this feature.

Also due to a lack of experience, consumers said that in general they would be cautious about purchasing sustainable products and would seek further information and clarification about the claims.

Products made with recycled plastic generated polarised views. Some participants felt comfortable with this and others were concerned that the material might not be durable enough, particularly where a product undergoes heavy usage. In this case, their desire to hold or feel products before purchasing was increased.

Recycling metal was perceived to be more ‘worthwhile’ than plastic, however people wanted to know why the whole product could not be made from recycled material, and again wanted more information about the process and where the material came from.

Participants were favourable towards products that use renewable energy (such as solar panels) in ‘innovative’ electronics such as mobiles, but would like to know more about the technology and how it would work and deliver benefits in practice.

Influence to purchase

Participants generally agreed they would purchase a product with environmental attributes if all other factors such as quality, price and specification were equal (although sceptical about many of the eco features).

The large majority of respondents thought that eco features would make the product more expensive and most questioned whether this would offer value for money in the long term.

Consumers generally wanted more information on eco features before purchasing. They were particularly interested in how they could make savings on their energy bills, and thought this could be more fully exploited by brands.

Most participants were open minded towards more eco electrical products being made available, however the area they thought would be the most logical in the immediate future is in domestic appliances.