



Brief



RoHS and the Green Link

Gerri Harrison

Director, Business Development
Kern, Inc

November 2008

With companies clamoring to share with you their sustainability initiatives, corporate responsibility can manifest itself in many forms. It may be the conversion to a paperless office or coordinating company wide recycling programs. If you look at only a few products recently purchased you can find any number of certification logos on the product labels. The Pringles can on my desk is made of 50% recycled material and the manual for my new digital camera is printed on 100% recycled paper. Green is globally touching every industry and entering into every household.

In the United States, individual states have been taking the lead in requiring government agencies to act green. This is nothing new. States have been passing laws to require the use of recycled materials since before green became a buzzword. Individual state mandates have led to a great fluctuation in recycling practices across the country with a few states taking the green lead. Washington, Montana, Iowa, and Colorado have some of the most stringent paper purchasing requirements for state agencies in the country, meaning that some percentage of the paper must be produced with postconsumer or recycled materials to qualify for government procurement contracts. These states have enacted tough regulations by which to abide, not because they have to, but because they know the importance of going green. These states, along with many others, have made allowances to pay more for a recycled product than a non-recycled product. This is not just to feel good about being green; it is necessary preventative action to keep the Earth green in the future.

One certification that you may not be as familiar with is RoHS, or the Restriction of Hazardous Substances. RoHS was first adopted by the European Union in 2003 as a way to promote the use of non-hazardous materials in manufacturing processes. RoHS certification is to electronics manufacturers as LEED is to home manufacturers. By eliminating the use of specific hazardous materials, potentially harmful emissions during use are eliminated and once those products eventually reach a landfill, certain pollutants will not be present to contaminate the environment.

RoHS and Green

Europe has taken the lead on green legislation, but the rest of the world is not standing still. In 2001, Japan passed the Japanese Home Electronics Recycling law, requiring manufacturers of large home appliances and electronics to collect and recycle their products once they are discarded. China is one of the world's fastest growing markets with a high population density that will require conscious management of waste to prevent pollution. China developed a RoHS-like program called the Regulation for Pollution Control of Electronic Products, introduced in 2006.

The global demand for sustainability and environmental consciousness led the European Union to mandate that all electrical parts and electronic products manufactured in and destined for use in Europe must restrict the use of six specific materials deemed most harmful to the environment after disposal. Those materials not to be used in any manufacturing process for electronics are lead, mercury, cadmium, hexavalent chromium, polybrominated biphenyls, polybrominated diphenyl ether. Some of those materials you may be familiar with and others you most likely are not. These materials could be used to manufacture the circuit board in your computer or your cell phone charger. While you might not see a RoHS logo just yet on your consumer products, that is likely to change as environmental certifications go global. For example, in 2007, California passed the Electronic Waste Recycling that emulates a majority of RoHS regulations for electronics manufactured in California and those destined for import to the state.

Today, because of computers and the internet we communicate and operate at a pace that was impossible 50 years ago. Text messages are sent and received instantaneously, web pages load immediately, and right now from my desk, I could buy a Corvette on eBay or sell my home on Craigslist. In an instant, we are able to have any information that we can imagine and fit into a search query. As our lives continue to demand the use of technology and our use of electronics to complete every day tasks has shifted from a luxury to a necessity, we must ask ourselves, "Where do all the electronics go when they die?"

After you move on to a newer Blackberry and upgrade to a faster computer, those tools for speed that you once relied on have since crashed and become dead weight in landfills. After electronics, both large and small, have no more use or transferrable value, they reach the end of their product life. These end-of life electronics have been referred to as e-waste, electronic based, but much more tangible than the e-communication type services on which we rely.

Ultimately, certifications like RoHS, with or without government mandates, will continue to be used because consumers demand them. For production mail environments, utilizing equipment that is RoHS certified may be one "green" initiative in which you are already participating. Whether your company calculates total carbon footprints or requires postconsumer materials to be used in the paper and envelopes that you send through your inserters, add RoHS to the list of the "green" initiatives for your company's participation. As consumer awareness of RoHS certification increases, the demand for RoHS products will surely follow.

Manufacturers and users of large, production mail equipment equally recognize that at some point, even the most trusted and reliable product will be replaced so that the end user can maintain a competitive advantage. To that end, high speed production mailing equipment manufacturers should be focused on meeting or exceeding RoHS electronics compliance standards.

To learn more about RoHS certification and why it is so important that electronics be manufactured without environmentally harmful materials, you can visit www.rohs.eu. Meanwhile, Kern will continue to be your production partner, continuing to provide RoHS certified systems and helping you find green solutions in the mail center.

Gerri Harrison is the Director of Business Development for Kern, Inc and has dedicated over 30 years to the mailing industry. If you would like any information on mailing solutions from Kern or just want to talk mail, you can contact Gerri directly at 888-KERN-INC or via email at gharrison@kerninc.com.