The Product Stewardship 2.0 Imperative

Life cycle benefits should drive new Stewardship programs

A growing number of Product Stewardship programs in Australia and abroad are in serious danger of becoming simplistic end-of-pipe solutions that are overly focused on collecting 'rubbish' and primitive materials recovery.

The need to recalibrate the definition and application of Product Stewardship is urgent, as is the need to consider waste avoidance and resource recovery priorities beyond end-of-life recycling i.e. the Product Stewardship 2.0 imperative as we call it at Infoactiv.

While Product Stewardship and Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) are often used interchangeably, the theory tells us that there are differences, some widely accepted, others concocted on the basis of regional or ideological grounds. When Professor Thomas Lindhqvist from Sweden's Lund University first coined the term EPR in 1990, his intent showed of clarity of purpose:

"Extended Producer Responsibility is an environmental protection strategy to reach an environmental objective of a decreased total environmental impact from a product, by making the manufacturer of the product responsible for the entire life-cycle of the product and especially for the take-back, recycling and final disposal of the product. The Extended Producer Responsibility is implemented through administrative, economic and informative instruments. The composition of these instruments determines the precise form of the Extended Producer Responsibility."

Lindhqvist's definition remains intact as does its integrity of purpose, however its interpretation and implementation have suffered dramatically in many instances, as EPR schemes devolve into unsophisticated waste management initiatives part funded by producers and part funded by the public purse.

What ever happened to the cost-shifting objective associated with EPR and ensuring that producers and consumers pay for externalities rather than local authorities and their communities? Furthermore, what measurable evidence can we test with regard to how EPR effectively ensures information feedback to the product development process to help create more benign, low impact products and product systems?

It is fair to say that useful examples can be found of where EPR and Product Stewardship programs have indeed informed new product development, especially in the commercial furniture, auto and packaging industries, however local authorities and public funds are still drawn on to partly cover the cost of 'industry-funded' schemes. Many critics will convincingly argue that cost-shifting from local authorities and governments, to producers, retailers and consumers, has yet to fully mature, especially in relation to more complex manufactured goods such as electrical and electronic equipment.

Lindhqvist's theory remains seductive, relevant and timely, however much can be done to achieve higher levels of EPR performance in reality. Whether we call it EPR or product Stewardship, there are glaring gaps in its implementation. Whether it's about equitable cost-sharing, greater retailer involvement, more direct feedback loops for improved design, or coherent internalisation of all externalities, we can all do much to improve the status of EPR and Product Stewardship schemes, to achieve significant socio-environmental benefit.

In short, the time has come to remind ourselves of the theory, and operationalise worthwhile policy principles into 'real-world' programs that are driven by life cycle thinking as opposed to simplistic and sometimes expensive 'waste' collection programs.

Beyond Simplistic Waste Management Responses

Let's remember the importance of good design, eco-innovation and the need to push the boundaries of pollution prevention. The principles exist, the tools are known and the metrics can be devised. What all players must do, is deliver on the intent and purpose of EPR and Product Stewardship, and this means targeting relevant stages of the product life cycle to intervene with necessary environmental improvement measures.

From design and cleaner production, through to greener supply chains and improved public education; it is vital that producers work collaboratively with retailers, government, researchers to meet consumer expectations and maximise environmental quality. The use-by date for spartan waste management programs has passed; the time for Product Stewardship 2.0 has clearly arrived.

Infoactiv welcomes the need to debate and improve the current status and performance of Product Stewardship and EPR in Australia and the region.

Let's talk about the journey ahead and how we can ensure that EPR programs deliver noteworthy environmental outcomes. This means creating solutions that are ecologically necessary, commercially responsible and socially desirable.

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