

Time to Collaborate for the Age of Paper

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An awareness of the problems associated with the use of plastics can provide new opportunities for the paper industry. We have to try to enhance the public awareness of the environmental value of papers by using diverse advertising approaches. We have to collaborate to make paper more viable to replace plastics in many uses. The collaboration not only between industry and academia but also between countries and associations is essential to advance the age of paper.

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A Challenge

Perhaps the biggest challenge facing today's pulp and paper industry is how to increase the eco-friendliness of our operations. Just as there are two sides to everything, paper has two sides with respect to eco-friendliness. In the case of paper products, an old prejudice appears to play a critical role in binding people to think that paper is not an eco-friendly product. The prejudice comes from the fact that it is necessary to cut trees in the forest to produce paper. I guess most Koreans have this prejudice, which makes it very difficult for the Korean paper industry to claim and promote using paper is a way to keep our planet green and to avoid contamination of the environment by plastics.

Opportunities

Even though today's paper industry faces many challenges, it has great opportunities as well. The general public now is aware of problems associated with the use of plastics. Paper is an environmentally friendly product because it uses renewable wood pulp as its main raw material, which degrades and decomposes into carbon dioxide and water after its use without leaving any traces of harmful remnants. We all know that wood has never been a burden for the environment of our planet. The same is true for paper. However, it is also true that we have to cut trees to make pulps. This raises a question to many regarding whether it is truly eco-friendly to use paper instead of plastic. Messages in South Korea for environmental protection campaigns often contain the word of trees or forest in them. In most cases, the trees or forest in these expressions are to be conserved, preserved, and saved. Koreans came to have this perspective during the period of vigorous reforestation by the government after the deforestation in the aftermath of the Korean War. Koreans believe that the best way to protect our environment is by planting and caring for trees in the mountains.

Caring for Our Forests

In this context, some believe that using less paper is the way to save the forest and environment, suggesting that paper companies go against environmental protection. It is interesting that one paper tissue company in Korea has been recognized as the eco-friendliest company. This clearly shows that, depending on the efforts, the paper industry can be recognized as an eco-friendly industry.

Because the main raw material of paper is pulp, it is obvious that we need to cut trees for paper production. However, it is also true that the pulp and paper industry cares much more than anyone else to keep the sustainability of global wood resources. Now, the paper industry is making paper using pulps with FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) or other types of certifications. This means that we produce pulps using wood harvested from systematically managed forests rather than from natural forests. It is not uncommon for today's paper industry to obtain wood resources from its own plantations, because it is a way that enables continuous supply of wood resources.

Recycling

Furthermore, we also produce some grades of paper using 100% recycled fiber. As a matter of fact, paper is the most widely and most efficiently recycled type of resources in Korea and many other countries. The recycling rate of paper in Korea is around 86%, which is a lot higher than those of plastics, metals, glasses, *etc.* In fact, most recycling companies in Korea collect plastics, glasses, and others only when they are allowed to collect paper in the same area.

As the use of computers became common in the 1980s, many thought that the future society would be a paperless one. However, we have to move to a plastic-less, not to paperless society, to protect our environment and our planet by replacing the plastics with papers. The paper industry has a role to play.

We Have a Story to Tell

First of all, the paper industry needs to spread the word that using paper instead of plastic will help protect the global environment simply because paper is made from renewable, recyclable, and biodegradable natural resources. From this point of view, the more plastic is replaced by paper, the more eco-friendliness our society will become. This is possible because paper is the material that can replace plastics in many uses. Papers with greater barrier properties and better strengths are being developed and introduced to replace the plastic. Straws, hangers, mannequins, and furniture made of paper have been introduced, and many other new applications will be found in the future.

I am happy to hear that the Korean paper industry is trying to enhance the public awareness of the environmental value of papers using diverse advertising approaches. Such efforts can be more effective when multiple organizations, associations, societies, and countries cooperate. It is time to share our ideas and thoughts to increase public awareness of paper to make this planet less dependable on plastics. It is time to collaborate to make paper more viable to replace plastics in many uses. Now is the time to increase the collaboration not only between industry and academia but also between countries and associations to advance the age of paper.