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Product stewardship: Sharing the load

Guest View

By Scott Cassel

Product stewardship. EPR. Producer responsibility. Cost internalization. Shared responsibility. Whatever you call it, I call it a revolution. Not one with Molotov cocktails, coups and kidnappings. But a rapid paradigm shift in which manufacturers, retailers, and others in the product supply chain realize that they have a significant role to play — a responsibility — to reduce environmental, social and economic impacts from the products they make and sell.

Six years ago, when the Product Stewardship Institute was still a business plan, the letters EPR were being used by two camps, both believing that manufacturers' responsibility extends beyond the product to the end-of-life management of that product.

But those choosing "extended *producer* responsibility" believed that manufacturers should take full responsibility for the end-of-life impacts from their products, and take them back — pure and simple. Those promoting "extended *product* responsibility" believed that the responsibility focused on the product, leaving it open for shared responsibility.

I chose product stewardship for the name of our organization because it was simple. I borrowed (some say co-opted) the term from industry, which primarily used it to describe their responsibility for managing facility operations — air and water emissions, waste management, worker safety, and other controls that take place, for the most part, within the walls of the manufacturing plant or on facility grounds.

The Product Stewardship Institute extends the term to upstream responsibility for the design of the product and mining of materials, and downstream to the end-of-life reuse, recycling, and proper disposal of the unwanted product.

Through its principles of product stewardship, PSI emphasized that each stakeholder — including manufacturers, retailers, government, and consumers — has a responsibility to eliminate, or at least reduce, product impacts.

The term "product stewardship" also avoided pointing a finger at producers as those solely responsible. Not only is such blame a disincentive to entice industry to the negotiating table, but it is also a wrong notion. No matter what term is used in the United States, Europe, Canada, or Asia, no one entity can solely eliminate the social, economic, and environmental impacts from consumer products. Even so-called model producer responsibility systems in Europe rely on government to assist in planning, policy and legislative development, enforcement, setting performance measures, data analysis, and other functions. And some require local governments to pay to collect the products. To create a truly sustainable economy, all stakeholders must become part of the solution. In reality, the best solutions are derived with input from all stakeholders because each one has a piece of the puzzle that the others don't have.

The key is to design a process to ensure that the expertise of each stakeholder is a welcome addition to the joint solution to a mutual problem.

Let me be clear. Manufacturers and retailers are in a very strong position to reduce product impacts. And there should be a direct financial incentive for manufacturers to reduce these impacts.

But we are all stewards, and we all need to take some degree of responsibility for products that we use to make our lives enjoyable, safe and productive. In any system in the world that I have come across, that responsibility is shared and it is negotiated.

Now let's get on with it, stop arguing over terms, start defining our goals, and set out to solve a few problems ... together.

Cassel is executive director of the Product Stewardship Institute, a nonprofit membership-based organization based in Boston. The second National Product Stewardship Forum will be June 14-15 in Chicago. For details, visit www.productstewardship.us.