

Single and limited use plastics

One simple change retailers can implement today to help tackle the issue of single and limited use plastics.

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Tackling single use plastics head on

Our Green Gift Card is the environmentally friendly alternative to single and limited use plastic cards. This white paper provides background to the wider plastics problem and then introduces the simple change that retailers can implement to help the environment, help their brand image and most likely save money too.

It also dispels the myths around the practicality of paperboard cards and explains how our exclusive relationship with a Swedish paper mill delivers environmental benefits over and above sustainability.

Introduction

With over 13 years of experience in the gift card industry behind me this paper conveys my views of the future and puts forward a compelling argument for what must surely be the simplest of changes for issuers of plastic cards to implement in order to stop their plastic cards ending up in landfill or even worse entering our waterways and oceans. First though it is important to get an understanding of the scale of the problem we face.

The plastics problem isn't new and has actually been building for almost 30 years. In the early 1990s researchers noticed that 60-80% of the waste in oceans was non-biodegradable plastic and that the amount of plastic washing up on beaches around the world was increasing. Then came the revelation that plastic waste was accumulating in the calm areas between ocean currents, creating what the oceanographer Curtis Ebbesmeyer called "great garbage patches". According to Ebbesmeyer the largest garbage patch – of which there are eight in total – is three times the size of France, and contains a mind boggling 79,000 tonnes of waste.





Although an ever-increasing problem it's always been tough to get people to care. Occasionally the odd alarming story about plastic would break through into the mainstream media and catch the interest of the public – the garbage patch has been a media favourite and there have been various scares about overflowing landfills, or stories about the massive quantities of waste we export – but it was nothing like the surge in public awareness of today's plastic pollution crisis.

So what helped this surge? One key influence, in the UK particularly, has been David Attenborough's 'Blue Planet 2' and more recently 'Drowning in Plastic' TV programmes that used emotionally evocative images of animals effected horribly by the plastic they consumed mistaking it for food or turtles being strangled by plastic bags. Some scientists and environmental activists however think there is another possible answer, and it isn't that the science on plastic has reached a critical mass, or that we have become overwhelmed by images of sea creatures choking on our rubbish. Their theory is that, at a fundamental level, the whole way we think about plastic seems to have been transformed. We used to see it as litter – an annoyance but not a serious menace. There has been a paradigm shift and that thought appears to have been changed by the recent widespread and almost global acknowledgment that plastic pollution is a far more serious and damaging issue than most people ever imagined.

We owe much of the advances in medicine, construction, transport and technology among others to the product made from turning a carbon-rich chemical mixture into valuable, mouldable structures to suit millions of applications that make our daily lives more convenient. In the context of this paper on the use of plastic in the manufacture of gift cards, plastic will always have a place. For me it's not solely about taking plastic cards out of the market all together, the challenge is more to do with post-consumer waste management of plastic cards and using plastic for the right products. Conscientious disposal of used plastic cards is almost impossible today for consumers with no scheme currently in place that will work effectively.

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Paperboard cards are the obvious replacement and I have been championing this for over 10 years now, but I am the first to acknowledge that plastic has its place in the gift, loyalty and membership card market. After all, paperboard cards have one drawback - they are not waterproof (even the ones that claim they are) and therefore for products that need longevity (2 years or more) or that are subject to intense use, i.e. bank cards, then plastic will be more suitable. If however, as is the case for most gift, membership and some loyalty cards, they are used once or twice a month or even less in their short lifetime, then using a paperboard card is a much better solution.

What is required here is a better method of managing the waste cards.

So my view is that to effectively deal with the impact of plastic in the card world, the simple switch from plastic to paperboard is the easiest solution. What's also important for where plastic cards are still required, is a take-back scheme operated by the card issuers and in collaboration with industry bodies such as the British Plastics Federation and their members who can recycle or up-cycle plastic card waste. A few years ago we ran a pilot scheme with one recycler who took over 1 million PVC (Polyvinyl Chloride) cards from a major retailer following their switch to paperboard. It proved to be a slow process due to manually sorting PVC from PETG (Polyethylene Terephthalate Glycol) and checking each card but more importantly in the end it was an effective method of responsibly managing the waste cards. What is required here is a better method of managing the waste cards and I believe a simple problem to fix if both the plastic industry and retailers work together to put a concerted plan in place.





The gift card market today

According to the latest research published by the UK Gift Card & Voucher Association (UKGCVA), consumer demand for gift cards remains high and the gift card market is continuing to grow and support UK retail, despite the challenging environment. The research provides insight into the gift card market's performance in the second half (H2) of 2018 and paints a promising picture for the industry, finding that overall growth has increased by 10.73% year on year.

In terms of buying habits and gift card use, out of 2,000 UK consumers surveyed, it was found that 84% have purchased a gift card at some point in their lifetime, and of those that have, 87% purchase gift cards at least once a year.

Reflecting the age-agnostic appeal of gift cards, purchasing penetration was high across all age generations, with 89% of Generation X (35-54) and 86% of Generation Z/Millennial (16- 34s) consumers revealing they have purchased a gift card at some point in their lifetime, compared to a slightly lower 78% of Baby Boomers (55+). Perhaps more surprisingly, it is the youngest generation (Generation Z/Millennial) of consumers driving the frequency of gift card purchasing, with 44% of Generation Z/Millennials admitting to buying a gift card at least once every two months, compared to 35% of Generation X and just 16% of Baby Boomers.

The second half of 2018 paints a promising picture for the industry, finding that overall growth has increased by 10.73% year on year.

When purchased as a gift for someone else, consumers spend an average of £27.64 when purchasing gift cards, yet - in what is unquestionably good news for retailers - 67% of respondents said they normally spend a higher amount than the original face value of the gift card when they redeem it. This demonstrates the true value of gift cards to retailers, the benefit of which can be felt well beyond the initial purchase; upon redemption, consumers are spending an average £18.55 more than the actual gift card value, equating to a 67% uplift on the average face value of the a gift card purchase (£27.64).



And 98.6% of gift card recipients said they spend them within a year of receiving them. While the majority of gift card shoppers (50.1%) are most likely to purchase gift cards from a retailer in a physical store, a growing proportion of shoppers cited online as their preferred purchasing channel, compared to when this research was last undertaken in 2017. The rising influence of digital channels is also evidenced by the factors that influence the purchase of gift cards; 58.6% of respondents said that the ability to redeem online is an influential factor.

Gail Cohen, director general of the UKGCVA, commented: "The 2019 research confirms the growing importance and relevance of the gift card as a consumer proposition across each generation of UK shoppers. However, with Generation Z and Millennials leading the way in terms of gift card purchasing frequency, it is now more essential than ever that the gift card industry evolves to meet the changing needs and desires of the modern consumer."

Gift card sales have increased across retail, experiential and third party supplier sectors, with store branded gift cards demonstrating particularly impressive growth at 16.64% for the period. This growth is being driven from an increase of 33% through the business-to-business (B2B) channel and a growth of 4.5% through the consumer sales channel.

Within the consumer sales channel, which includes gift card malls found in supermarkets and convenience stores, online sales and sales of store branded gift cards sold direct from retailers' own stores, have once again shown significant growth, comfortably exceeding online consumer sales. However direct sales from retailers' own stores, with a lower growth rate of 4.7% in the period, is still where the majority of gift cards are purchased, accounting for 75.62% of all gift card consumer sales.

Business-to-business (B2B) sales accounted for the largest percentage of growth in H2, up by 22%, as more companies utilise gift cards for incentive and reward schemes. In comparison, consumer sales increased by 3.94% in what is historically their better-performing period leading up to Christmas, revealing an almost equal share of the market in this period between B2B and consumer sales.

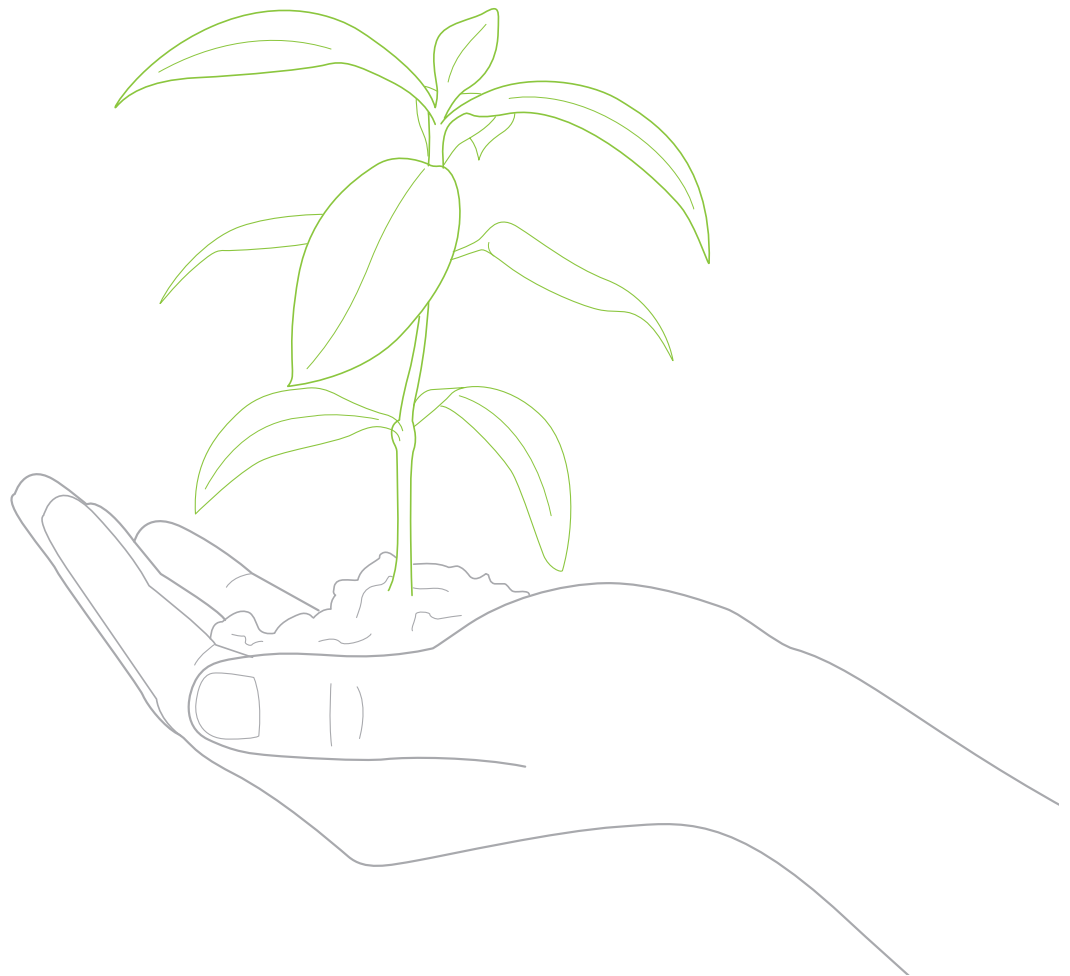
The report analyses data submitted by UKGCVA participating members which include leading high street retailers, department stores, supermarkets, online retailers, and is the most authoritative report compiled for this industry.

The research reaffirms the belief in the sustainable nature of the gift card market which continues to rapidly evolve.

Lastly, despite the increasing adoption of e-gifting, there is seemingly no sign of the industry moving away from its reliance on physical cards so given the enormous tasks facing retailers to deal with their plastic challenges, switching from plastic cards to paperboard is the simplest and least challenging change to make.



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Busting those myths

If you still have doubts about how effective the switch to paperboard cards could be, then by dispelling the following myths we'll surely convince you...

Myth...paperboard is not durable enough for gift cards.

Fact

There are millions of paperboard gift cards already in the market today with no consumer complaints of product failure. Apple, one of the most consumer focussed companies in the world, is one of the world's largest distributors of paperboard gift cards and has been now for a number of years.

Myth...paperboard is not as cheap to produce and print.

Fact

The price per card is comparable to PVC and plastic and in most cases cheaper, although price can fluctuate based on many factors, mainly volumes. Simply talk to the few printers who have the experience, equipment and can print on appropriate quality paperboard such as Thames Technology. Additionally, obtain comparative quotes from similarly experienced printers.



Myth...no brands have chosen to switch to paperboard for their programme.

Fact

That is simply not the case at all. In 2018 the following brands (plus many others) have paperboard cards in the market place.



facebook

sky



Google

SONY

amazon

Myth...consumers don't care what material their card is printed on.

Fact

There are two answers to this myth. The first is that consumers tend to focus on purchasing a brand, a value and an experience and the material itself doesn't affect their decision therefore they will happily purchase a paperboard card.

Secondly, more consumers are demanding green alternatives so if they are presented with a green option they will likely opt for that over non-environmentally friendly options. Figures backing this point up show that demand for green packaging has risen 5.41% annually since 2015 and this is set to increase significantly going forward as the media continue to inform and influence consumers.



Blue Planet 2, consumer sentiment and its impact on us all

In the UK particularly, the issue of plastic waste came to a head early in 2018, with David Attenborough's Blue Planet 2 raising widespread awareness of the impact of plastic pollution as part of climate change issues facing mankind today.

For brands in industries where plastic is an integral and seemingly unavoidable part of product packaging, such as FMCG, food and drink, fashion, and cosmetics, a definitive solution appears hard to come up with.

Growing consumer concern in a recent survey by ThoughtWorks⁴ indicated that 62% of the 2,000 respondents said their main concern for the next ten years is the need to reduce plastic packaging and to use recyclable materials. Second to this, 57% of respondents cited the price of goods as their key concern. This survey would suggest that the public has perceived environmental issues to be more important than cost considerations when it comes to their purchasing decisions. Other research backs up the increasing demand for brands to take real action to do more to protect the environment, as well as the desire for them to actively promote their stance instead of just passively putting measures in place. The Edelman Earned Brand report suggests that 64% of consumers worldwide are 'belief-driven buyers', meaning that they would either choose to switch or boycott a brand based on its stance on social and environmental issues. With the environment one of the biggest issues currently on people's minds, it seems the brands that do-nothing may risk negative consumer sentiment and the pain that brings. Last year, a large number of restaurants, fast food chains, and coffee outlets replaced plastic straws with paper ones, similarly, with six-pack plastic rings causing significant harm to sea life, beer and other FMCG brands are finding alternatives. This move has attracted positive consumer sentiment and positive PR for the brands involved. Across most industries then, brands do appear to be slowly introducing or at least looking at green alternatives, and in turn making it easier for consumers to make better environmental choices.



As we mentioned in our myth busting earlier, in the context of gift cards, when a consumer buys a gift card for either self-use or to give to someone for a birthday or occasion, they are usually making that decision based on a brand, a value and an experience and not necessarily whether it is a plastic or a paperboard card. We've noted though in our own research that consumers would buy a paperboard card rather than a plastic card if the choice was given and the environmental benefits conveyed to them - mainly the fact that there is no burden on them when it comes to disposing of the spent card. Through considerable testing and by gauging brand and consumer views over time we soon established that a paperboard alternative had to provide a very similar 'feel' to plastic cards so rigidity and thickness were key considerations. This limited the materials that would be suitable, and we have probably tested most of those possible materials over the years. There are so many benefits to the right paperboard cards - they are quicker and cheaper to produce, they use less energy to manufacture and today now more than ever with the sharp focus on the impact of plastics on the environment, they are biodegradable, harmless to our environment and can easily be recycled.

Typically, a PVC gift card produces 21g of carbon vs a paperboard one which only produces 0.66g to make⁵. In terms of manufacture, paperboard also provides many more opportunities for embellishment - we have a wide range of textured and enhanced environmentally friendly printed applications and finishes that can transform the look of a gift card, not dissimilar to the way premium product packaging employs similar techniques.

A decorative graphic consisting of a grid of small dots forming an L-shape.

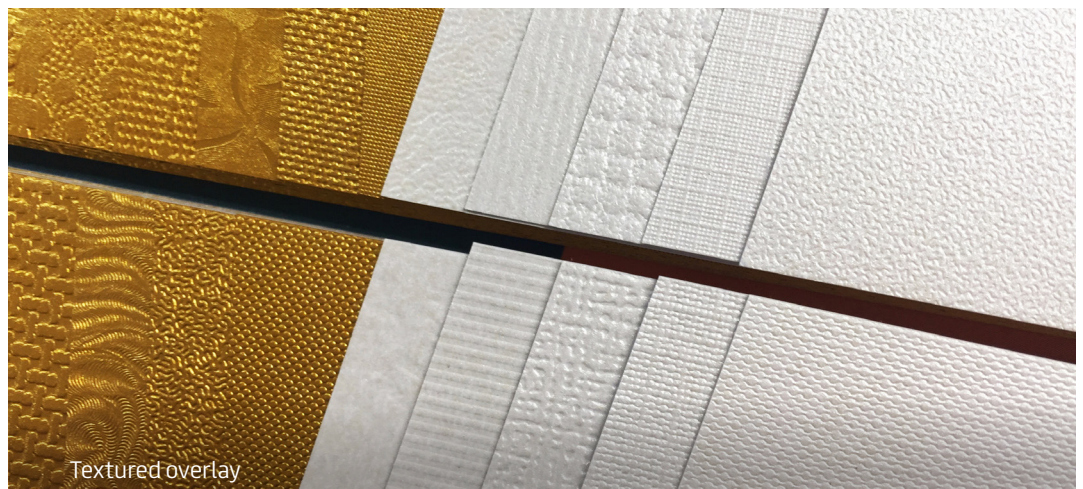
Research backs up the increasing demand for brands to take real action to do more to protect the environment.

Sources: 4. ThoughtWorks : Conscious consumption replaces decadent waste society as Britain is on the brink of a food revolution.
5. Iggesund Paperboard calculation based on Invercote® carbon footprint

The design community can help influence the future...

It has been clear for years that the designers at brands and card issuers have been limited to the production capabilities and costs associated to plastic card manufacture.

Those of us championing the green alternatives in the gift card space now need to engage with and encourage the creative community to explore what can be done with paperboard and break the monotony of plastic card design limitations. I urge designers to think differently when designing their gift cards now and to consider the process in the same way they might look at premium FMCG product packaging and entertainment packaging such as games. Not only can we collectively have a positive impact on the environment by helping a brand make a bold environmental statement, but we can also be more creative with gift card designs. Today we are able to offer a range of 100% environmentally friendly and wonderfully tactile textures that can be applied to the face of our base board and deliver new 3-dimensional creative impact. We also of course have multiple traditional and environmentally friendly embellishments such as soft touch, glitter, metallic, foils and neon. There really is no limit to what can be done with paperboard which opens up a world of possibilities for the design community and brands.





Helping customers to understand how their gift cards will look as the finished article pre-production has been a challenge in terms of cost-effective mock ups and visuals but we have now developed a sampling system that allows us to digitally print a handful of cards directly on the actual material used as well as cutting to shape, including perforation to simulate snap products. Innovations such as this will aid designers to bring their creative thoughts to life prior to production and keep costs down which should help shape the decision-making process moving forward.

In addition, the development work and years of testing has seen us create arguably the best paperboard snap product for M6 cards and this along with other all-in-one formats is owned by Green Gift Cards. Our design ensures that once the product is snapped the CR80 element of the card has a clean top edge and perfectly rounded corners to emulate the finish of a plastic equivalent CR80.

Thanks to these USPs, Green Gift Cards can offer an unrivalled product offering to brands and card issuers that will allow them to create cards that go way beyond the traditional restrictions and cost prohibitive methods used to embellish plastic and PVC cards.



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Single and limited use - why do we over engineer?

In nearly every instance plastic gift cards are over engineered for their purpose. Service providers of digital, downloadable content such as games and access to streaming services as well as gift cards used for online redemption have already identified that paperboard is the best solution for their gift cards. Brands such as Sky, iTunes, Google and Amazon already have paperboard products in the market.

Unfortunately, more often than not, PVC and plastic cards are used for traditional gift cards purchased in stores for the purpose of gifting, which still represents the largest usage of the cards, and they will only get used one or two times. In most cases they are used once and form part of an incremental purchase, so the cards likely spend longer in the supply chain or on the display hook in store than they do in the hands of the recipient.

The research I have conducted in stores when redeeming gift cards supports my previous comments about the management of the spent cards – where in nearly every case I’m told by the cashier that they simply throw the cards in the bin. This invariably means they are destined for landfill where they will stay, indefinitely as they do not breakdown. If they are made from bioPVC they will eventually breakdown into smaller particles of PVC that will potentially enter the water system in years to come.

Prior to the sharp focus on the plastics crisis I have had conversations with high street fashion brands whose only argument against switching from plastic to paperboard is “it’s just not plastic” despite the many benefits. This sentiment is beginning to change. As stated previously I do acknowledge there is a need for plastic in the market but really only for products that need to last for a number of years or are subject to intense daily usage. That said, our own extensive tests have yielded positive results when carrying out ‘mag swipe tests’ with our paperboard from Iggesund, testing in excess of 400 swipes with no reduction in data integrity.



The impact of plastic vs paperboard on landfill

Because paperboard cards are all produced using materials that are 100% natural and come with strong environmental credentials, at the end of their useful life they can go into regular household waste streams where they will biodegrade harmlessly in landfill. Alternatively they can be recycled without any specialist techniques along with other household recyclables such as paper and cardboard.

By diverting used plastic cards from landfill, we can make a small but still important positive impact as our part of mitigating the plastic pollution crisis - it's that simple and brands can easily switch from plastic to paperboard.

Environmental impact comparison:

Material	Considerations
PVC	Energy hungry to produce. Doesn't degrade. Decomposes on burning emitting toxic vapours of hydrogen chloride and phosgene. Requires specialist recycling but is subject to a minimum 1 tonne and can incur costs.
Styrene	Doesn't fully degrade. Emits toxic fumes of styrene oxide when heated to industrial composition and in landfill.
Bio PVC	Doesn't fully degrade. Breaks up into small pieces only, potentially entering the food chain.
PETG	Expensive to make and expensive to recycle.
PLA	Made from renewable oil sources but is expensive.
Paperboard	Completely harmless in landfill where it will return to its natural state, paper was once wood after-all. Easy to recycle. Strong environmental credentials.

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Our paper – from forest to mill

Green Gift Cards enjoys a special relationship with paper manufacturer Iggesund with an exclusive supply agreement for products in the Invercote Duo range for use in the card market in the UK and Ireland.

Igesund say making “nature’s best paperboard” is easy, albeit tongue in cheek but the principal is simple. You need water, carbon dioxide and sunlight to grow a seedling into a tree. Then you need sustainable forest management that can deliver first-class timber. There must be a pulp mill and a paperboard mill, ideally in the same location, and then distribution channels to get the paperboard to various destinations around the world. The Iggesund Mill in Sweden has traditions that can be traced back to 1685 but also today it is one of the most advanced, fully integrated pulp and paperboard mills in the world, not least thanks to their long-term majority owner who is constantly investing in their mills and technology. There are benefits to having an integrated saw mill as it allows Iggesund to manage raw material together and they can use all the waste from their production to either make pulp or energy. This allows them to feed the saw mill with steam used to dry the timber. At the Iggesund Mill, 100% of the pulp used to make Invercote is produced on location and pumped wet to the board machine. Not drying the pulp preserves some mechanical properties of the fibres.

The advanced technology found in the hundreds of metres of paperboard machines means they can work around the clock and year-round to produce tonne after tonne of the bright white paperboard. Invercote’s unique properties are the result of the combination of technical expertise, innovation and cutting-edge technology. In 2012 a new recovery boiler was added at the Iggesund Mill which ensures the mill produces all the heat it needs and can also provide district heating to the nearby community. It also produces nearly all the electricity needed for the mill and is connected to the grid to be able to output excess electricity if needed to power other areas of Sweden. As the new boiler was brought into operation, it drastically reduced output of emissions from the mill between 2013 and 2014: fossil CO₂ by >85%, particles by ~45% and sulphur by ~35%.



Iggesund consider the forests as the planet's lungs. Well-managed forests transform carbon dioxide into life-giving oxygen and serve as nature's own carbon storage solution and both Iggesund and parent company Holmen are committed to mitigating climate change and to managing their forests and manufacturing processes to the highest environmental standards. Replanting is a natural part of responsible forest management and harvested volumes are consistently lower than the growth rate, providing a 1% increase of standing timber volume per year in the group's forests.

They are so committed to this ethos that they have introduced a scheme that allows brands to plant trees in their name, giving them a way to follow the growth and development of the forests, with a Certificate of Care issued as a proof of trees planted in the brand's name. I have had the benefit of visiting the forests and mill in Sweden and seen first-hand the process from seed quality control to sapling development and planting. There is science behind this seemingly simple and natural process and the way the forests are then managed is key, not only for harvest yield but also the careful balance for nature and the community to use the forests for recreation and enjoyment. The planning, technology and recording of tree locations and their place in the lifecycle of the forests is quite fascinating. Then finally, the mill itself is an incredibly efficient mix of technology, innovation, heavy industry, logistics and expertise from a dedicated work force combining to produce a product that is used by some of the biggest brands in the world who demand the highest standards. Green Gift Cards benefit from this and I would urge anyone keen to learn more about our material to visit the forests and mill for themselves to fully understand just how environmentally friendly this element of their card is.

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Legislation

The UK government has set out its 25-year Environmental Plan that includes looking across the whole lifecycle and how the tax system or charges could influence and reduce the amount of single use plastics waste, the impact of which will be felt by manufacturing and retailers alike. The plan states: Its goals are simple - cleaner air and water; plants and animals which are thriving; and a cleaner, greener country for us all.

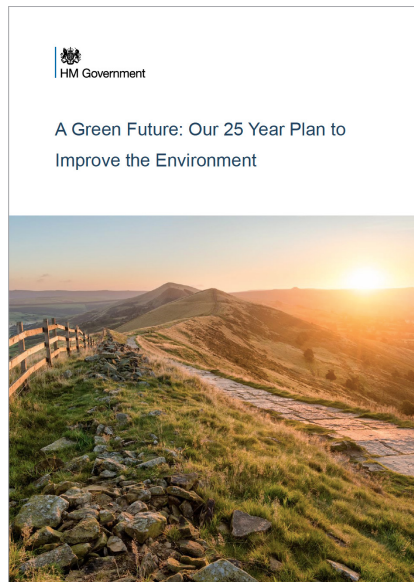
Progress has already been made with government plans to improve environmental protection, from banning microbeads which harm our marine life to improving the quality of the air we breathe to improving standards of animal welfare. The ambitious but welcome plan aims to tackle what it calls 'the scourge of waste plastic' citing the success of the 5p plastic bag charge in reducing the use of carrier bags by 83% which does show the difference positive action can make.

The strategy refers to the momentum for positive change that is growing in government as well as society as a whole which must be harnessed in coming months and years. My main criticism is the time frame – in my view we should be more ambitious and make changes sooner.

It states that Government will help bring about change in a variety of ways, using both incentives and regulation, to make sure that responsible attitudes towards the environment become the norm. The Government has sought views on how the tax system or charges could reduce the amount of single use plastics that enter the 'system'. At the production, consumer and post-consumer stages the Government says they will encourage producers to take more responsibility for the environmental impacts of their products and rationalise the number of different types of plastic in use.

At the consumption stage, they want to reduce the amount of plastic in circulation through reducing demand for single-use plastics and ensure clear on-product labelling to help consumers understand how best to recycle the item at the end of their life. These plans will challenge manufacturers and brands who are responsible for developing alternatives, effectively and quickly. This enormous task facing the industries in the UK and indeed around the world must seem daunting – prioritising the big projects is key of course, but there are many simple changes that can be easily implemented, the material used to produce gift cards is one such easy change and one that can be implemented today.

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Paperboard specification

The material used in the production of our Green Gift Cards has been developed by paper manufacturer Iggesund Paperboard and is 100% recyclable, biodegradable and responsibly manufactured at the almost entirely bio-powered Iggesund Mill.

The 2 variations of paperboard used to make Green Gift Cards is a high-quality board that boasts superior print and colour reproduction properties and features a patented coating formula providing outstanding lightfastness that gives the end product a longer life when compared with other available paperboard products.

With strength, rigidity and thickness comparable to PVC, it is especially suitable for gift, membership and loyalty cards and according to consumers and issuers asked feels and looks like plastic when produced with a gloss finish. Conversely, for brands who want to make a strong environmental statement that their cards are made using paperboard, the uncoated version is receiving rave reviews and is being referred to as a premium product with a high quality “paper” feel.

Features and Benefits

- Paper weight 790 micron
- Paper Type: Solid Bleached Boards, Virgin Fibre
- Created with 94% renewable sources
- Taint and odour neutralit



Features and Benefits

- Biodegradable
- Compostable to EN 13432 standard
- 100% recyclable
- Rigidity and thickness comparable to PVC cards
- Premium look and feel
- Long lasting
- Swipe durability tested to more than 400 swipes with no negative outcomes
- Ideal for snap card formats
- High brightness printing quality
- Bleached using an Elemental Chlorine Free (EFC) process
- EN 13430:2000 Standard Compliant
- Conforms to ISO9706 requirements for performance
- Produced at a mill that is certified to ISO14001 environmental management standards and ISO9001 quality management standards
- The mill also meets ISO 50001 for energy management and OHSAS 18001 for health and safety
- Fossil fuel admission free mill and zero landfill policy
- Mills rated Gold Standard by EcoVadis, placing them in the top 2% of the paper companies assessed.
- Sourced from forests that plant more trees than are harvested



Finishes & Embellishments

- Gloss or uncoated finish
- Water based matt or silk varnish
- UV gloss varnish
- Hot / Cold Foils
- Embossing
- Textured and 3D coatings
- Spot, matt coatings
- Flocking
- Mirror and metallic surfaces
- Soft touch and much more

Personalisation & Data Applications

- Magnetic Stripes
- Scratch Panels
- Bar Coding
- Signature Panel
- Die Cutting to unique shape



Price comparison

Producing a more environmentally friendly gift card isn't more expensive.

Our environmentally-friendly cards cost up to 58% less than PVC. (cost saving based on a run of 250,000 GGC3 on 790 micron compared to the equivalent card from the leading plastic card alternative).

Brands can also save on postage charges by taking advantage of Royal Mail's discounts on sustainable advertising mail. As Green Gift Cards physically weigh half as much as their PVC equivalent, they are therefore less expensive to transport, using less fuel.



Graph illustrates cost saving based on a run of 250,000 GGC3 on 790 micron paper board compared to the equivalent card from the leading PVC alternative



Production process - plastic vs paper

To produce traditional plastic gift, loyalty or membership cards today is still a relatively lengthy, energy hungry and complex process that requires multiple production steps.

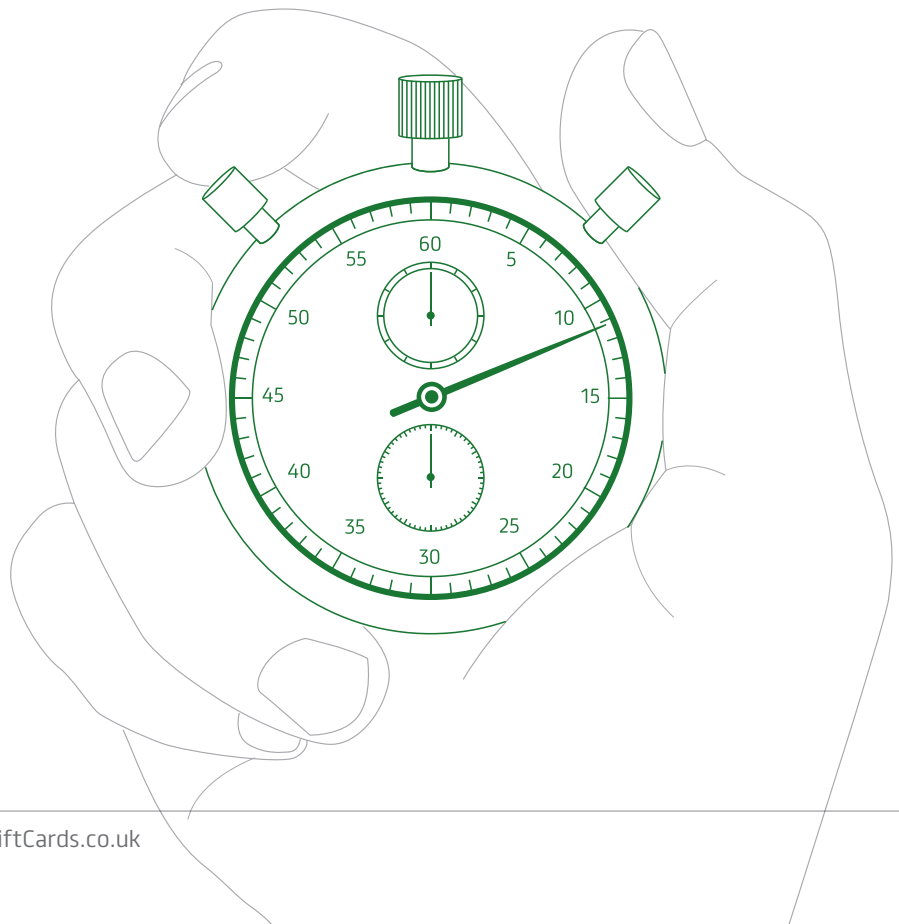
It starts with two separate sheets of PVC to be printed, one that will form the face of the card and the other the reverse of the card. If the card uses a magnetic strip, which most of the gift cards in the UK still feature as the method of activation or redemption (whereas the majority of cards throughout Europe use a printed barcode instead) then this is usually applied to a separate sheet of lamination film. Another sheet of laminate is applied to the face of the card - this makes 5 separate components used to make the card. Once these components are collated, they are pressed together in a large heat press. This press has to reach temperatures of up to 300oF for up to 20 minutes where the sheets are pressed at over 125psi. The sheets are then cut out to the final shape of the card on an expensive cutting press, usually CR80 (credit card size usually glued onto a separate cardboard carrier backing card) or M6 (CR80 card and body in a single format) with or without a snap off area.

The cut cards are then fed down a data application line where the magnetic stripe is encoded, PIN number and various elements such as scratch off panels and human readable data is applied. The cards are scrutinised throughout by high speed cameras that read the data to ensure integrity and accuracy. The final steps usually include packing 10 or 20 cards into a cellophane wrap with a label applied then boxed in 200's and palletised ready for delivery to their destination, usually a Distribution Centre.

It is a well-honed process and the plastic card manufacturing industry has developed efficient processes over the years, but nevertheless the process is still complex and on average an order for plastic cards takes four weeks or more to produce.

In comparison, paperboard cards are much less complex to produce. The key difference is the material used is a single core, so it starts life as a single sheet of board that runs through a conventional printing press that can handle the heavy substrate. During this process both the front and back of the card are printed and varnished in two passes through the machine on the same sheet and some instances are printed to the front and back in a single pass through the printing press. The cards are then cut to shape on a less specialist, less expensive cutting machine compared with plastic cards, a magnetic stripe is applied to the cut card and then the data application process follows the same process as plastic cards. This process in effect misses out the need to collate the components and heat press them together, thereby saving a considerable amount of time and energy.

Paperboard cards are much less complex to produce. The key difference is the material used is a single core





Lead-times - plastic vs paper

Thanks to fewer stages in the paperboard production process (three compared to PVC's five), production timescales are considerably shorter than other options.

Our shorter processes enable us to offer typical turnaround times of 10-15 working days for print production and 5-10 working days for personalisation. This compares to 4-6 weeks and even longer in the build-up to peak trading times for plastic cards.

Faster timelines mean more flexibility for brands.

Another benefit of our much quicker turnaround is that card copy and artwork can be changed more frequently, enabling brands to plan more targeted or seasonal promotions.

Typical production times:

Quantity	Material					
	Green Gift Card	Bio PVC	PETG	PVC	PLA	Styrene
5,000	2-3 wks	3-6 wks	4-6 wks	4-8 wks	6-12 wks	6-12 wks
10,000	2-3 wks	3-6 wks	4-6 wks	4-8 wks	6-12 wks	6-12 wks
25,000	2-3 wks	3-6 wks	4-6 wks	4-8 wks	6-12 wks	6-12 wks
50,000	2-3 wks	3-6 wks	4-6 wks	6-12 wks	6-12 wks	6-12 wks
100,000	2-3 wks	3-6 wks	4-6 wks	6-12 wks	6-12 wks	6-12 wks



Best Buy US example

The US market is more mature than the UK and some trends can be forecast based on this. Best Buy has switched from plastic gift cards to paperboard ones.

The move took six years of research and it is estimated that this will divert 18 tonnes of plastic, the equivalent weight of about nine cars, from landfills this year. The cards are printed on paperboard that has been certified by the Forest Stewardship Council as having been harvested from responsibly managed forests. The move is what younger and environmentally conscious consumers have been asking for. But it also comes with a business upside, according to a Best Buy company blog: “The new cards are now cheaper to make than plastic”.

Gift cards are an inexpensive strategy that helps businesses of all types keep their brand front of mind, retail experts say. Physical cards serve as in-store and in-wallet advertising, and help retailers improve relationships with customers and strengthen brand loyalty. They also help get customers into stores, where six in 10 ends up spending more than the gift card was worth.

With consumers becoming savvier about the environmental impact of their favourite retailers' products and packaging, poorly conceived and executed actions are easier to spot – such as a brand that implements a “recycling scheme” while continuing to use unnecessary amounts of plastic in packaging. The result could be brands appearing as though they're jumping on the bandwagon for PR purposes. Even worse, consumers could end up switching or boycotting companies for ones that display greater authenticity and who can actually demonstrate their green strategies.



Close

In conclusion as we look back on the past year, plastic certainly stands out as one of the biggest consumer concerns. Looking ahead, it's likely that demand for change will continue to increase, meaning it's up to brands to do more than just 'their bit'.

For years our target was to create paperboard gift cards that replicated plastic in look and feel and we have achieved it. After that the target was to meet the demand for an option that looks and feels like a premium paper, we too have achieved this and we are currently seeing a high demand for the 'paper' feel as it makes a clear environmental statement – “this card is produced on paperboard and is recyclable, it will not harm the environment and it removes the burden on me when it ends its life as I know it is biodegradable.”

Our Green Gift Cards are receiving rave reviews from brands.

Switch today, it really is easy, and your customers will love you for it.

That demand for change will continue to increase, meaning it's up to brands to do more than just 'their bit'.





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