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High-tech Company Websites Receive Mixed Grades

A California environmental organization evaluates the quality of environmental disclosure contained on the websites of high-tech companies. The results are relevant to social investors.

The Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition released its second annual report card on the quality and quantity of environmental information posted on the websites of 44 U.S., Japanese, Korean and European consumer electronic and electronic component manufacturers.

While a company's overall environmental practices cannot be judged simply by analyzing the information posted on the corporate website, the report card may be useful to social investors in evaluating a given high-tech company's commitment to transparency.

The highest possible overall score was 87 points. The top ten, in descending order, were Canon, IBM, NEC, Mitsubishi, Sony, Fujitsu, Toshiba, Matsushita, ST Microelectronics, and Sharp. Canon's total was 55 points, which is an overall score of 63 percent.

The report, entitled "Right to Know a Little: Exposing High-Tech's Double Standards," examined eight indicators: product stewardship, hazardous and toxic chemical use, energy efficiency, water conservation, establishing environmental standards for suppliers and subcontractors, applying the highest standards for protection of environmental, worker and local community health throughout all international operations, measuring job-related illness and the long-term health of workers and local communities, and ease of access to information on the corporate website.

Product stewardship was defined as taking a proactive stance toward reducing product impact on the environment. Examples of company initiatives include Matsushita (Panasonic) using lead-free solder in its portable mini-disc player and IBM using 100% recycled plastic resin in its Intellistation E-Pro. Fujitsu, Hewlett-Packard and Canon scored the best in this category, with Fujitsu getting an 18 out of 24 score.

Concerning hazardous and toxic chemical use, scoring was based on how well companies disclosed information on their web sites concerning chemical discharge and utilization. The report stated that most Japanese companies are now providing information about the chemicals used, how they are released to the air, water and land, as well as the amounts recycled. Toshiba, Epson and Fujitsu garnered the top scores here, with Toshiba receiving 10 out of 12 points.

The study also attempted to determine whether companies were adhering to the strictest performance guidelines throughout their worldwide operations regarding the protection of environmental, worker and local

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community health. Again, evaluations were made according to information published on websites. Canon, IBM, NEC, National Semiconductor, Hewlett-Packard and AMD all scored well, but Canon was the only company to get 6 out of 6 points.

Regarding energy use, companies were graded on their initiatives to improve product energy efficiency, their disclosure of product energy requirements, and their goals for reducing energy use in product manufacturing processes. Canon, Mitsubishi and Sony all received 12 out of 12 points.

Water use was analyzed in terms conservation goals. Some U.S. firms in Europe and Asia have succeeded in recycling water in their manufacturing processes, but most firms in operating in the U.S. were criticized for discharging large amounts of wastewater. Canon, NEC, Philips and ST Microelectronics were the high scorers here, receiving 10 out of 15 points.

Large manufacturers are increasingly being expected to establish environmental performance standards for their suppliers and sub-contractors. The report claims that all manufacturers should disclose the criteria used in selecting and monitoring the environmental performance of sub-contractors. Sanyo, Hewlett-Packard and IBM nabbed the highest scores in this category, with Sanyo and Hewlett-Packard getting 5 out of 6 points.

Occupational health was an indicator. Companies were graded on whether their posted information made a distinction between job-related illnesses and injuries in the workplace, as well as how workforce and local community health are monitored. Ten companies received two out of three points: AMD, Compaq, IBM, Intel, Lucent, Motorola, National Semiconductor, Texas Instruments and NEC.

Finally, the availability of information on the website was rated in terms of how easy it was to access. Criteria included whether there was a link on the homepage and whether keywords other than terms such as "environmental health" were necessary in doing a successful search. Canon, Mitsubishi, ST Microelectronics and Agilent received the top scores of three points.

A review of the report would not be complete without mentioning the poorest performers. Eight companies had the dubious distinction of not receiving any points at all. They were Applied Materials, Maxtor, Seagate, Silicon Graphics, Daewoo, Hyundai, LG Goldstar and SK Electronics.

It should be noted again that this report card only evaluated the disclosure of information on corporate websites. A company's actual overall performance may be better or worse than what it reports.

Nevertheless, transparency is an important issue for social investors, so this report is relevant. More comprehensive environmental and social reporting on corporate websites will enable consumers to make informed choices about 'green' products, and help social investors determine which companies most deserve their money.

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