

## Buying Green

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Headsprout

Thanks to innovations in technology and the Internet, informed purchases are rapidly becoming a part of everyday life. One reason for this is the growing number of amazing applications now available for mobile devices, such as Apple's iPhone and Motorola's Droid, that put important consumer information at our fingertips.

I walk into my local Costco and find it is featuring a toaster oven. The price looks good, but is it? I tap the RedLaser application ([www.redlaser.com](http://www.redlaser.com)) button on my iPhone and instantly get a screen labeled "Scanned Items." I touch a scan button at the bottom of the page. A camera aperture opens and a rectangular outline appears. I turn the toaster oven's box on its side and position the bar code inside the rectangle. In a few seconds a page appears listing local stores and online vendors who sell the same item along with the price. Instantly I know if Costco's price is a good deal, how far I would have to travel to get the lowest price, and how long I have to wait for an Internet purchase. Tapping another button takes me to product and vendor reviews. Thanks to the RedLaser application, everything I need to make an informed decision about a product is right there in my hand.

Everything, that is, except information about the product's environmental impact. How much electricity does the oven use compared to others on the market? How environmentally friendly is its manufacturing process? What about the level of toxic chemicals that will end up in a landfill?

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What is the overall carbon footprint over the life of the product? Wouldn't it be great if, in addition to information about price, reliability, and customer satisfaction, I could get a rating for a product's greenness?

There have been some recent efforts to use bar codes to provide green information to consumers. One notable example is GoodGuide ([www.goodguide.com](http://www.goodguide.com)), an iPhone, iPod touch, and iPad application that provides "health, environmental, and social performance ratings for over 65,000 food, toys, personal care, and household products" (GoodGuide/iTunes, 2010). Simply scan a product's bar code and GoodGuide provides a rating. GoodGuide is a very good start in providing the information needed to change consumer behavior. I say "good start" because the number of products covered is limited, and its database does not automatically intersect with the pricing and other features available with apps such as RedLaser.

What's needed, and what I propose, is the establishment of an international database, tied to the bar code of every consumer item, that can be accessed by mobile-device applications. Such a database has the potential of encouraging consumers worldwide to make greener choices.

The database could be established by an agency of the United Nations, by various private agencies or foundations interested in combating global warming, or even by for-profit corporations, such as eBay (which recently acquired RedLaser), to provide a better consumer experience. Perhaps a partnership or consortium of international agencies, such as Consumer's Union and the Union of Concerned Scientists, could create

and oversee the database. Manufacturers would not be required by law to submit environmental data, but those that did not do so might be at a disadvantage in the marketplace: If one toaster oven has a green rating of A and another N/A for “data not available,” the consumer may suspect the worst and buy the greener product. The free market alone should be enough to drive corporate participation.

I’m not suggesting that a green rating alone will dictate consumer choices. When people make purchasing decisions, a range of variables come into play (availability, features, customer reviews, reliability ratings, etc.). However, price is usually the single most important variable. When similar items have very different prices, the cheaper item typically wins. But when prices are similar, other factors come into play. Consider availability. I may be willing to pay a little more to get the toaster oven now, rather than wait a week to get it from an online store. And I may opt for a product that has received uniformly positive reviews rather than a product many users found unsatisfactory, even though the higher rated product is more expensive. Green ratings, if readily available, might affect consumer behavior in the same way.

Let’s revisit my toaster oven. The two toasters before me have similar features and are about the same price, but one has a green rating of A– and the other C+. There’s another brand in a store down the street with an A+ rating, but it costs several dollars more. My decision will depend on a host of variables, including my budget, schedule, and level of knowledge and concern about how my choice affects the environment. But even if I don’t buy the greenest oven, buying the greener of the two before me leaves the planet better off than it would have been had I not had information about their environmental impact.

It would be naive to suggest that most consumers will make green ratings their number one criterion in choosing products. Some new Energy Star refrigerators use much less electricity than other models. That’s great, and I’d love to buy one. But if the Energy Star refrigerator costs twice as much as other refrigerators with similar features, I may have a hard time opening my wallet that far. Consumer decisions, like all choices we make, are determined largely by their short-term consequences for the individual, not by their long-term consequences for society. But as more and more people realize that protecting the environment is in their own interest, the greenness of products will play a greater role in their behavior, including the purchases they make. One of the most important things we can do to encourage green purchases is to make information about the environmental impact of products readily available. An international database of every product’s greenness and a way to readily access it would do just that.

But would providing easily accessible applications for smart phones really have much of an impact? Smart phones have become the default communication devices worldwide and are quickly being adopted by everyday consumers. In its most recent quarterly report, Apple claimed sales of over 60 million iPhones worldwide. AT&T reported 3.3 million new iPhone activations during the second quarter of 2010 in the U.S. Apple recently reported the sale, in the U.S. alone, of over 1.7 million new fourth generation iPhones in just 3 days. Other vendors of smart phones are seeing similar growth. Cellular-news ([www.cellular-news.com](http://www.cellular-news.com); June, 2010) reports that smart phone sales in Asia will exceed 76 million in 2010 and increase to more than 100 million by 2011. Electronista ([www.electronista.com](http://www.electronista.com); June, 2010) reports there are currently about 74 million smart phone users in Europe and the

numbers are growing rapidly. At this rate, the smart phone will have replaced the simple cellular phone within the next few years. Coda Research Consultancy ([www.sribd.com](http://www.sribd.com); May, 2010) forecasts “that worldwide sales of smart phones will total 2.5 billion units throughout 2010 to 2015.” With the application and database proposed here, every one of those 2.5 billion individuals could make purchases informed not only by price and quality but also by the impact of the products on the environment.