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Friend of Nature? Let's See Those Shoes.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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Timberland was surprised to find that more than half of the energy used (and greenhouse gases generated) in making a pair of shoes comes from processing and producing the raw materials. The next-biggest energy drain is the retail environment (think of all those brightly lighted malls), followed by factory operations and, finally, transportation -- almost a complete inversion of what Timberland had assumed.

Tesco is trying to devise industry guidelines, akin to standardized food labels in the United States. A commonly accepted measure, Sir Terry said, "will enable us to label all our products so that customers can compare their carbon footprint as easily as they can currently compare their price or their nutritional profile."

Full Text (1003 words)

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WHEN thinking about their contribution to global warming, concerned citizens might consider the cars they drive, the air miles they log and the energy they burn in their homes. But few would look at the shoes they wear or the food they eat.

That is changing. Just as food products are labeled with calorie and nutritional information, consumer products are beginning to bear details about their environmental impact, like the amount of greenhouse gases produced in making, transporting and selling them.

Sir Terry Leahy, the chief executive of the British supermarket chain Tesco, broached the idea earlier this year in a speech to stakeholders. He announced that Tesco would spend almost \$1 billion over the next five years to lead "a revolution in green consumption."

To arm the would-be rebels with information, he has proposed labeling products to reflect their carbon footprint, starting with tens of thousands of Tesco-branded food and clothing products.

Sir Terry offered no specifics about when the public would see such labels in Tesco stores. The plan is for the company to help create a Sustainable Consumption Institute, which will develop a universal carbon measure, but that could take years. A few other companies are farther along the eco-labeling path.

One is Timberland, which since last fall has included a "nutrition label" with its footwear, detailing the energy used in making the shoes, the portion that is renewable, and the factory's labor record.

Timberland's chief executive, Jeffrey B. Swartz, said he wanted to give customers "the ability to make value judgments at the point of sale."

This is easier said than done. Timberland, like many companies, has hundreds of factory partners around the world, which use material from thousands of suppliers. It takes a large investment to collect such far-flung information.

"We found that our supply chain goes farther than we imagined," Mr. Swartz said. "You have to go back to the cow" that supplied the leather.

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"The vast majority of our carbon footprint comes before we even make the shoe," Mr. Swartz said.

Once companies understand what goes on in their supply chains, there are hundreds of calculations to be made. How much energy is used to transport a pair of shoes? That depends. Do you assume that the trucks are two-thirds or completely full? What kind of fuel do they use? And what about employee-commute miles? Should they be included, too?

For these reasons, Timberland first relied on metrics from its global footwear production, so every pair of shoes displayed similar statistics: 3.1 kilowatt hours of energy to produce, 5 percent renewable energy used and no child labor.

In February, the company, which is based in Stratham, N.H., introduced the next evolution of its labels, called green index tags, which move closer toward measuring precisely the effect of each pair of shoes. Instead of raw data, the tags use a scale of 0 to 10, with the bottom denoting the smallest impact (or best choice) on an expanded range of issues.

Climate effect is measured from raw materials through production of finished product. A 0 rating means that less than 4.9 kilograms of carbon equivalents were generated, while a 10 signifies 100 kilograms or more. (One hundred kilograms, or 220 pounds, is roughly the equivalent of burning 11 gallons of gasoline.)

The tags also rate chemical use and the proportion of recycled, organic or renewable materials that were consumed. Green tags are being included with just five shoe models, but the company's goal is to tag all its shoes and clothing by 2009.

The information is not very useful, however, unless customers have something to compare it with. If a pair of Timberlands rates a 2 on climate impact, that's great. But how does it compare with your Nikes?

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Timberland said it hoped to broaden its green index into an industry initiative. Mr. Swartz said that if he could sign up 10 or 12 companies, others might feel pressure to follow suit.

Gary Hirshberg, a co-founder and chief executive of Stonyfield Farm, praised the efforts of Timberland and Tesco. But ultimately, he said, independent certification by a third party is more credible.

This spring, Stonyfield is expected to announce that Climate Counts, a nonprofit group it helped found, will independently evaluate leading consumer-products companies' efforts to manage their climate effect. The idea is to create a metric that will allow consumers to compare, say, McDonald's and Burger King.

Climate Counts will join a field that is already crowded with third-party environmental certifications, many of them aimed at specific areas, like the Marine Stewardship Council for seafood; VeriFlora for flowers; Green Seal for government and corporate buying. There is even a professional association for environmental labeling groups, called the Global Ecolabelling Network.

Perhaps there will be an uber-label someday. Or, as Mr. Swartz predicted, consumers will be able to point cellphones or other gadgets at interactive electronic tags on products to get more information than could ever fit on a printed label.

But will the information change buying behavior? Studies by Cone/Roper and other researchers suggest that price and quality being equal, consumers prefer ecologically and socially responsible products and companies. But a bad environmental rating may not override a desire for a pair of must-have shoes any more than nutrition labels stop people from eating junk food.

[Illustration]

Drawing (Drawing by Ray Bartkus)

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