

INTERNET; E-mailers send a message: Please don't leave paper trail; They aim to reduce printing, but some doubt it will work.

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Stephanie Fessler doesn't drive a hybrid car, compost her orange peels or bring her own reusable cloth bags to the supermarket.

But two months ago, Fessler joined countless other businesspeople in doing one environmental good deed daily. At the bottom of every e-mail she sends, she includes this message: "Save Trees. Print only when necessary."

"This is something I can contribute in my crazy busy life," said Fessler, 29, who works for a Los Angeles public relations firm. "It reminds other people about environmental awareness and reminds me on a daily basis."

The trend took off in March, when the popular environmental website TreeHugger.com encouraged readers to add the don't-print plea to their automatic e-mail signatures.

Since then, the message has spread beyond the granola-and-Birkenstock crowd to the cubicle armies of corporate America. Architects, airline employees and even button-down accountants have gotten in on the act, as have companies such as media giant News Corp.

The parent of Fox Television offers employees a catchy admonition that riffs on the company's "Cool Change" environmental initiative: "Be cool, consider the environment. Please don't print this e-mail unless you really need to."

At Bovis Lend Lease, a 10,000-person worldwide project management and construction company, so many employees began adopting the please-don't-print line that executives agreed to grant a sole exception to the company's rule against personalized e-mail signatures. And as many as 1,000 accountants and consultants at Deloitte & Touche have adopted some version of the line, one executive said.

"It's a testament to how cool green is that this particular message is appearing in so many business communications," said John Palfrey, executive director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School.

Environmentalists say the don't-print message has genuine merit. Despite 20th century predictions of a paperless office, Americans use enough sheets every year to build a 10-foot-high wall that would stretch from New York to Tokyo and beyond, according to GreenPrint Technologies, which sells software to eliminate unnecessary pages before printing.

At the same time, an estimated 97 billion e-mails whisk through cyberspace every day. Technology trackers say more e-mails invariably mean more printouts, if for no other reason than that printing has become a habit. Last year, 53% of people surveyed told research firm IDC that they printed more because of e-mail. That means more paper, and more energy to shred or recycle it.

The growing mountains of printed pages encouraged Michael Graham Richard, TreeHugger.com's editor, to get behind the please-don't-print movement after he saw the auto-signature for the first time last winter.

"We all know that many people print e-mails for no good reason, wasting tons of paper," Richard wrote on the site in March. "Let's do something about it, dear reader. . . . Add the following lines to your e-mail signature: 'Eco-Tip: Printing e-mails is usually a waste. Make this tip go viral, add it to your e-mail signature.' "

To some, the various incarnations of "please don't print this" -- personalized with clever witticisms or written in bold green text alongside a picture of a tree -- are a new, socially responsible form of viral marketing.

To others, the tips are an empty, greener-than-thou finger wag.

"You're saving a landfill by not using more paper -- not saving the planet," said Jake Munsey, an executive at Fox Cable Networks' Fuel TV who has stopped using the eco-tip. "I started thinking, 'What really is this going to change?'"

Rob Guglielmetti, a lighting designer, blogger and committed, ride-his-bike-to-work-every-day environmentalist, said as much to his boss a few months ago when the supervisor suggested using the enviro-missive on all outgoing company e-mails.

"People get this kind of smug satisfaction about how green they are -- 'Hey, look at me, look at how great we are, we as a company are trying to teach you about sustainability and saving trees and saving the planet,'" said Guglielmetti, who lives in Boulder, Colo.

On his blog, Rumblestrip.org, Guglielmetti offered a sarcastic list of alternative green e-mail signatures, including, "Printing this message kills trees. Print is murder!"

"I don't think clients need to be addressed in that manner during their workday," Guglielmetti said. "They don't need to hear a personal message about the environment. It has more of a place in a personal e-mail than a business e-mail."

TreeHugger's Richard scoffs at the notion that the simple suggestion is sanctimonious.

"The intent is not to be preachy -- just offer a tip on how to save paper," he said.

Businesses have reasons beyond cost and tree saving to promote prudent printing, said Randolph Kahn, founder of Kahn Consulting, which specializes in helping businesses design and implement information management strategies.

Having a no-print policy along with scheduled purges of e-mails can help a business stave off spending millions of dollars to produce documents connected to lawsuits, Kahn said.

"For most corporations that have a policy to not print out e-mail, do I really think it's about saving trees? I have some questions," Kahn said. "Maybe it's about trees and maybe it's about having a company better manage and control its information."

Fuel TV's Munsey said he understood why the eco-signature was a good idea for companies and the environment. But he sheepishly added that corporate encouragement to add the line was among the reasons he took his own eco-signer off.

"Once everyone started using it and thinking about it, the idea was out there and it was time to move on," Munsey said. "That's how I'm justifying taking it off. But the reality is that I took it off because everyone else was doing it."

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