

Practice essay · Everyday practice

A carbon label is a question, not a verdict

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Fictional author and institute · Editorial demonstration, not peer reviewed

ABSTRACT

A product carbon number becomes useful only when its unit, function, boundary, and assumptions are understood. This practice essay draws on the GHG Protocol Product Standard and the Green Claims Code to explain why superficially similar labels may not support a fair numerical ranking. It examines use-stage scenarios, named comparators, assessment dates, evidence links, and the distinction between emissions and claimed compensation. A general standard alone does not guarantee product-specific comparability. For workplace purchasing, the discussion recommends seeking matching documentation rather than forcing uncertain estimates into a precise league table. Carbon remains one consideration alongside suitability, repair access, cost, and other impacts. The conclusion supports proportionate decisions with visible unknowns, not personal verdicts or an expectation that shoppers audit entire supply chains.

Keywords: carbon labels · functional units · life-cycle boundaries · environmental claims · product comparisons

Adapted from the Still North field journal. Original article. A source-based editorial text, not a report of original Still North research. Examples and imagery are illustrative.

Two products sit beside each other. One carries a carbon number; the other has a green badge and a promise. It is tempting to make the number do all the work. But a figure only becomes useful when you know what it counts, what it leaves out, and which service the product provides.

You do not need to become a life-cycle analyst to shop. A few questions can tell you whether a label supports a comparison, points towards a useful improvement, or asks for more confidence than its evidence deserves. They can also help a workplace buyer ask the supplier for information that an individual shopper cannot reasonably investigate at the shelf.

What is the number attached to?

Begin with the unit. Is the figure for a whole product, a kilogram, a portion, a wash, or an assumed period of use? A value for dry food cannot be directly ranked against one for the cooked equivalent. A bottle's footprint says little about cost per use unless the amount used is also comparable. Look for the definition rather than inferring it from the largest print.

Next ask whether the products meet the same need. A reusable object depends on how often it is used and how it is cleaned. A larger appliance provides different capacity. A durable chair needs to remain suitable and in service. Comparing unlike functions can produce a precise answer to a question nobody intended to ask.

Where does the accounting stop?

The GHG Protocol Product Standard describes accounting across raw materials, manufacturing, transport, storage, use, and disposal. A particular claim may cover only part of that chain. "Made with lower emissions" and "lower life-cycle emissions" therefore ask different questions. A factory-stage result should not quietly stand in for the whole product.

Use-stage assumptions can matter greatly to the interpretation. Which electricity system is assumed? How many years of use? What washing or charging pattern? Which disposal route? Those questions do not make the assessment worthless. They explain the conditions under which it is useful, and whether your intended use resembles them.

The GHG Protocol also cautions that comparing products requires more specific product rules than its general standard alone provides. Two suppliers both naming a familiar standard is not enough to establish that their numbers have matching boundaries, data, and assumptions.

Look behind the comparison word

"Lower" needs a comparator. Is the reference an earlier model, a category average, a selected competitor, or a hypothetical alternative? Check the date and whether the comparison uses the same function and method. A product can improve relative to its predecessor without becoming the best available choice, and an improvement per item need not describe the supplier's total emissions.

The UK Competition and Markets Authority's Green Claims Code guidance calls for truthful, clear, substantiated claims, fair comparisons, and consideration of the full life cycle. It also warns against hiding relevant information. These principles are a useful reading aid even when you are not making a legal judgement about a particular label.

A "neutral" or "compensated" claim needs a further distinction. Ask for the product's emissions before any claimed compensation, what activity is said to balance them, and the evidence for that separate claim. Do not assume the word means that manufacture or use produced no emissions.

An evidence link should answer something

A useful linked explanation identifies the product and assessment date, the method, the unit, the boundary, and important assumptions or exclusions. It says who prepared the assessment and whether an independent party checked it. A link to a general corporate ambition is not the same as evidence for the item in your hand.

For a substantial workplace order, ask the supplier for comparable documentation before setting a scoring rule. If two estimates have different methods or uncertain inputs, do not force them into a league table with spurious decimal places. You can record that the evidence is not yet sufficient for a numerical ranking while still evaluating repair access, fitness for purpose, and contractual support.

Make a decision without making it a verdict

Carbon is one environmental dimension, not a complete account of water, habitat, pollution, working conditions, cost, or accessibility. A label cannot decide whether you need the product at all. Nor should missing information force a person with limited time or money to become the unpaid auditor of an entire supply chain.

Use the strongest evidence available for the actual decision, note what remains unknown, and ask for the missing information where you have leverage. Our [sources and methods](#) page explains this distinction between evidence and interpretation. [Buy less, repair more](#) starts one step earlier, with the need. A good label helps a choice; it does not certify the character of the person making it.

References

1. GHG Protocol Product Standard (ghgprotocol.org)
2. Green Claims Code guidance (gov.uk)