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Google

Long known as an internet and software focused company, Google has rapidly expanded its line of Google-branded personal computing devices with its Pixel smartphones and laptops, as well as its Google Home smart speaker, as it moves to compete more directly with Apple in providing a hardware and software product that is tightly integrated. However, in sharp contrast to the environmental leadership we have seen from Google in its data centers that deliver Search, YouTube, and the company's other online products, the hardware side of Google lags significantly behind Apple, HP, Dell, and to a lesser extent Microsoft, in designing and manufacturing devices in a way that minimizes their impact on the planet. Google has begun to make some improvements in its transparency and goal setting, but will need to move much more aggressively if it hopes to catch up to Apple and other leaders.

Renewable Energy & Climate Change

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TRANSPARENCY. Google provides above average reporting of the energy and climate footprint of its data centers and other Google-owned facilities, including important details on its renewable energy purchases. However, Google ranks near the bottom of the sector in providing details on its product supply chain footprint. Along with Amazon, Google is only one of a handful of companies that do not report their product-related supply chain emissions, refusing to break them out separately from other Scope 3 emission categories such as business travel and construction. Unlike Apple, Microsoft, Dell, HP and others, Google does not even provide a list of its suppliers by spend.

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COMMITMENT. Along with Facebook and Apple, Google was among the first global brands to adopt a long-term goal to power its operations with 100% renewable energy, and has set a mid-term goal to triple its renewable energy consumption linked to its own operations to 3.3GW by 2025. However, Google has yet to extend its 100% renewable commitment to its product supply chain as Apple has, nor has it set supply chain greenhouse gas reduction targets as HP has done. Google has recently established short-term goals to increase the reporting of emissions and adoption of greenhouse gas reduction targets among its suppliers, with the benchmark set for 2017 that 90% of its suppliers will set GHG reduction goals.¹

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Renewable Energy & Climate Change (continued)

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PERFORMANCE. Google continues to aggressively pursue access to renewable energy both for its US operations and increasingly for its own operations internationally, totalling 2.6GW of renewable energy generation, currently the largest procurement of renewable energy by any corporation.² However, Google should let that leadership speak for itself, and cease its current claim that it has reached 100% renewable power for its own operations in aggregate globally. Attempts to claim excess “credit” from renewable energy procured in one region or country to be used to atone for its demand for dirty energy in another part of the world are not appropriate. Such claims are misleading, and undermine the bar for renewable leadership by corporations as well as Google’s long-standing principle of driving new renewable energy supplies in the same region its operations are drawing from the grid. Google should continue that principled approach as it seeks to build a renewably powered supply chain for its products. It is encouraging that Google is able to report that a high percentage of its suppliers have adopted emission reductions targets.³ Hopefully progress on both levels will help improve Google’s reporting on its supply chain footprint.

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ADVOCACY. Support for stronger and smarter climate and renewable energy policies by Google has been recognized as a consistent area of leadership in our evaluations of the IT sector stretching back to 2010. This has continued in 2017. Google was among several IT companies that spoke out publicly to urge officials in the Trump administration to keep the United States a member of the Paris Climate Agreement, Google also joined Amazon, Microsoft, and Apple in filing an amicus brief in support of regulations by the US EPA that would set carbon reduction goals for the US power sector. Google has been engaged in policy advocacy outside the US as well, supporting efforts to create access to renewable energy in Taiwan, as well as stronger climate and energy policy adoption in the EU.

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Sustainable Design & Resource Reduction

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TRANSPARENCY. Similar to Google’s reporting on its product energy footprint, Google lags far behind sector leaders in providing meaningful detail on reporting useful information to create a baseline on the amounts of material resources that are currently going into Google’s devices, and the extent to which Google has been successful in setting priorities and achieving meaningful resource reductions. Google does provide higher quality details on its efforts to source conflict minerals from certified conflict free smelters,⁴ but only provides select recycled content information on Google Home and Chromecast in its environment report, and similarly limited information on its product take-back program.⁵

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COMMITMENT. Google underscored the importance of moving away from our current take-make-waste linear production model, and engaged in some thoughtful leadership based on early success with pilot projects in the operation of its data centers. However, Google has yet to embrace any measurable commitments to transition its hardware products to a closed-loop supply chain or to utilize higher percentages of secondary materials in its products.

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PERFORMANCE: CIRCULAR PRODUCTION. Absent a more tangible commitment to closed-loop production, Google has taken only some small steps toward a more circular model. In addition to the use of recycled plastics in its Google Home and Chromecast devices, Google has also identified the importance of expanding its mineral resource due diligence to give a greater focus on cobalt and copper mining. Google’s Pixel product design has been above average overall in terms of ease of disassembly at end of life, including the use of non-proprietary screws and modular parts.

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Sustainable Design & Resource Reduction (continued)

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PERFORMANCE: PRODUCT LIFE EXTENSION. Google's decision to abandon the Project Ara modular smartphone platform was a significant blow to hopes of a more sustainable smartphone design, but Google's Pixel has at least managed to incorporate some basic elements of modular component design that should help facilitate repair and greater product longevity. The decision to not follow Apple and Samsung and stick with an aluminum case rather than glass in the recently announced Pixel 2 is promising. Google should build on this relative strength to deliver smartphones, tablets and PCs that are durable and can be easily repaired and upgraded, as HP, Dell, and Fairphone have already delivered.

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ADVOCACY. While Google has been supportive of circular economy thought leadership initiatives, Google is also a member of ITI, which has been lobbying to block Right to Repair legislation in several US states. If passed, this legislation would provide important rights to customers in their ability to access affordable repair services, and in turn encourage customers to repair devices, extending the product's useful life.

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Hazardous Chemical Elimination: Products & Supply Chain

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TRANSPARENCY. Unlike leaders Apple, Dell, HP, and Fairphone, Google does not publish its list of suppliers. Google's recent publication of its first Restricted Substances Specification addresses a critical gap between Google and the other leading companies, setting limits if not outright prohibition of certain chemicals from its product and from the manufacturing process. Google recently reported on its overall supplier audit program and what measures it has undertaken to address non-compliance issues.

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COMMITMENT. Google's recent decision to publish its [Restricted Substances Specification](#) helps close an important gap for Google, as it joins Apple, Dell, and Microsoft in committing to eliminate a range of hazardous chemicals from both its products and its manufacturing process.

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PERFORMANCE. Google's recently published RSS indicates that BFRs and PVCs have been prohibited for use in all materials, as Apple has done. Similarly, Google has restricted the use of antimony trioxide, beryllium and phthalates. Google has also restricted the use of benzene, n-hexane and toluene in supplier factories for cutting and degreasing processes. Google suppliers are required to perform an alternatives assessments using a comprehensive chemical hazard assessment framework such as the GreenScreen® for Safer Chemicals or the US EPA Safer Choice Criteria.

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ADVOCACY. No evidence found of positive or negative advocacy.

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ENDNOTES

1 <https://static.googleusercontent.com/media/www.google.com/en/about/assets/pdf/2016-Responsible-Supply-Chain-Report.pdf>, p.17.

2 <https://static.googleusercontent.com/media/www.google.com/en/green/pdf/google-2016-environmental-report.pdf>

3 <https://static.googleusercontent.com/media/www.google.com/en/about/assets/pdf/2016-Responsible-Supply-Chain-Report.pdf>

4 <https://static.googleusercontent.com/media/www.google.com/en/about/assets/pdf/2016-Responsible-Supply-Chain-Report.pdf>

5 https://support.google.com/store/answer/3036017?hl=en&ref_topic=3244667