

new ideas new thinking



Founded in 1996, the Brighton-based company now carries a product range of over 3,000 items, and designs and manufactures for both its own and other established brands including Apple, Blackberry and HTC.

In 15 years of trading Proporta has seen the use of mobile devices grow exponentially and the sales for its accessories has more than matched that growth. Whilst much of that demand has been consumer-led, the industry itself is a major driving force, benefitting from high profits on accessory sales to offset the much lower margins achievable on the devices themselves.

Proporta

A fast-moving company operating in a fast-moving environment, Proporta designs and manufactures a large range of high-quality protective cases for smartphones, laptops, MP3 players and iPods as well as providing an extensive range of accessories for the mobile technology market, a market predicted to be worth £32 billions by 2015.

The challenge

Hugely successful, the Proporta business model is based on high-quality, fashion-led products, most of which will be relegated to a bottom drawer or disposed of with the purchase of the latest model. The company acknowledged that it was becoming an increasingly high user of finite resources and in January 2010 decided to take a serious look at its environmental credentials and create a greener range of mobile accessories. Just four months later a new, sustainable product range was launched.

The response

“When we decided to launch a ‘green’ range we knew we wanted to do it wholeheartedly and not just climb aboard the greenwash bandwagon,” said Graham Boyd, Senior Product Designer. “Our products are generally made from plastic and packaged in cardboard, and initially we felt it should be reasonably easy to identify some alternatives, but the more we found out the more we realised that we needed some real expertise to guide our sustainable R & D and ensure our environmental credentials were second to none.

“Local company Giraffe Innovations specialises in helping organisations to reduce environmental impact

and improve commercial efficiency and we asked James Dorrell to help us create an environmental base line to verify our carbon footprint and look at ways of reducing it.”

Because of the nature of the work involved James was able to refer the company to the Interreg IV A 2 Seas and SEEDA co-funded programme, EcoMind, which supports companies that want to develop environmental innovation and sustainable design and is delivered locally by WSX Enterprise. The programme then funded a three-day consultancy package during which James and WSX carried out a full carbon and eco review of Proporta’s existing mainstream products and the proposed ‘Proporta Smart’ eco alternatives. The resulting Lifecycle Assessment (LCA) not only gave Proporta the confidence that they were on the right track with their design decisions, it also introduced them to new materials that could reduce the footprint of their Smart range of products even further.

The completed LCA allowed Proporta to compare the full range of environmental and social damages assigned to every raw material it used. It concluded that the total greenhouse gas footprint for a standard mobile case was 799.8g CO₂ equivalent. At just 324.2g CO₂e, the proposed eco case was confirmed as a much greener option.



The main savings came from the use of recycled leather. Created in a similar fashion to recycled paper, its use also

meant that production could remain with existing suppliers and the range could offer a similar look and feel to the company's mainstream products. James also recommended exploring the use of other new materials and further savings came from replacing canvas with hessian as a lining material, and using laminated bamboo for packaging that then also doubles up as a screen protector, replacing aluminium and providing further material savings. Even the printed cardboard instructions now have a designed-in function, forming a template for a consumer constructed device stand and resulting in

zero waste from the initial purchase. Importantly, each design effectively protects the product it contains.



"The nature of our industry means that all decisions are taken and implemented much faster than in many organisations and EcoMind was there exactly when we needed it," said Graham. "Thanks

to the programme, James could guide us and he brought with him a 'grab it and do it' mentality and we are staying in contact as we would definitely use him again. Remarkably, there was also very little bureaucracy involved in the whole process.

"The Proporta Smart range is definitely here to stay," said Graham. "We will also be reusing some of the techniques we have learned, and building them into our primary product range."

The Outcome

Already Proporta has moved to using a recycled plastic blend across all its ranges where possible. It has also identified other ways to reduce its environmental impact including switching to carbon neutral shipping.

"We are not going to change the world in a day", said Graham, "but we are looking at what is realistically possible and setting targets for the future."

The success of the Proporta Smart range is tangible and its design quality was recognised nationally when it received the MacWorld Editor's Choice Award for best iPad case, praised for its green appeal, dashing style and the way it cunningly turns into a stand: "it looks every bit as smart (actually smarter in most areas) as other cases and Proporta hasn't compromised anywhere, either materials, design or build quality."

WSX wanted to work with Proporta because they presented a company who had a genuine interest in reducing their use of finite resources. In the mobile phone accessories industry, heavily influenced by the fashion of the moment, they knew they wanted to reduce their carbon impact but still offer products their customers would buy. By facilitating their work with an environmental consultancy we gave them the tools they needed so they still could respond to market requirements but with a hugely reduced impact.



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