

Banning Brominated Flame Retardants

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As a commercial company we constantly aim to work “with the customer’s expectations in focus”. These expectations are a mix between those pronounced and those not and may include anything from design and price to health and environmental aspects.

After many years, people are starting to see the environment as a part of these expectations. Added to this, they also see the connection between environmental issues and personal health. Companies capable of fulfilling these expectations will be successful in business.

We at IKEA try to fulfil these expectations by focusing on the aspects we may be able to influence such as ensuring that the product is well designed, functional and mechanically sound, made with safe materials, produced and handled with as low environmental impact as possible.

Unfortunately, to have only environmentally perfect products only helps the environment if they can compete commercially and generate profit. Our solution to this is taking many small steps on a broad base and once in a while take a bigger one, constantly on our way toward a better everyday.

The founder of IKEA, Ingvar Kamprad has a saying fitting this area very well:

“Most things remain to be done - A Glorious Future!”

Attempts to create an environmentally sound product very often go deep in to the heart of products or production, banning materials or chemicals, both those leaving remains in a product as well as those used for the production.

As a multinational company we very often are able to catch upcoming problems early on and act on those, such as brominated flame retardants which is one of many.

But when you touch the very heart of a product you can’t always anticipate the side effects you get, both positive and negative.

We have received many question why we had the foresight to ban bromine long before any legislation was seen or even heard of. The answer is neither exact nor even possible to define.

If I say it like this: “A few innocent words may become very worrying if they appear in the same sentence”.

We didn’t read the words, we read the whole sentence, it worried us!

We started following reports about brominated fire retardants more actively in the mid 90’ties. As time passed these reports got us more and more worried.

Even if there was very little definite data about risks, there was enough indications to worry us.

It was very clear that the brominated flame retardants is persistent, that there are a build-up, that disposal of products with BFR may generate high levels of dioxins. We also read about indications about possible hormone disruptive effects.

We also had enough parallels of substances following the same pattern as BFR. A build-up, accumulation in tissue, unconfirmed suspicions and then finally proofs followed by a very long recovery period.

We decided to take our concerns to someone much more competent in this area than we were, to get advice.

I'm can't say that we didn't get less worried and after this we decided that we, step by step, would get bromine-free.

Changing to environmentally safer solution is very like a military obstacle course.

The biggest obstacle seems to be in attitude, do not change my world or I don't want to go first.

The course is filled with misconceptions and misrepresentation both knowingly introduced and those created by lack of reliable information and sometimes because lack of quantifying.

Production units are going larger by the day, further away from the customer, and less prone to offer anything other than the standard solution.

We have legislation and test methods more or less based on techniques which was top of the line 10-15 or even 25 years ago preventing new techniques which can offer the same solution but slightly different.

Naturally we have a financial obstacle in moneys bound in profit generating techniques and manufacturing and new flammability protection techniques having a hard time getting recognised. Technical obstacles vary from colour, feel, production failure rates and much more.

Are we in IKEA immune to these obstacles or are we just smarter than everyone else.....?

I would really like to say that we (or at least I) are a lot smarter, but I guess it's better to stick to the truth and just admit that we possibly have only one advantage we are not afraid of change and we have a very hard time believing that things can't be changed. We cleared the BFR-obstacle with some marginal but sooner or later we will be the one that slips.