



'Green' stores open door to energy waste

High street stores all boast of their environmentally friendly policies yet the open doors generate thousands of tons of carbon dioxide emissions

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The green credentials of the high street are being blown away in a blast of hot air. Stores including Next, French Connection and Waterstone's have told staff to keep shop doors open on even the coldest days.

The stores all boast of their environmentally friendly policies yet the open doors generate thousands of tons of carbon dioxide emissions.

Last week, as snow swept Britain, The Sunday Times used a thermal imaging camera to test all the shops mentioned above, along with Gap, Monsoon, The Body Shop, Superdrug and Topshop. All the stores, in central London, were found with doors open and the images reveal heat flooding out.

In many shops the heat loss was increased by so-called air curtains — air-conditioning devices that blast hot air downwards over an open doorway to entice passing shoppers from the street with their warmth.

Chris Huhne, the energy secretary, condemned such policies this weekend: "This is irresponsible. Leaving doors wide open wastes energy."

A study by Cambridge University's engineering department found that a store in an exposed high street location almost doubles its winter energy use if it leaves its doors open. Even shops in sheltered spots used about 30% more energy. Since retailers generate some 24m tons of CO₂ a year, the impact of open-door policies on emissions is important. The study said: "Closing doors is an effective way to reduce energy consumption."

Such findings might seem like common sense but stores say they have to balance being green with getting customers through the entrance — and closed doors can be a barrier. Some have blanket policies ordering doors to be kept open, while others leave the final decision to managers — many of whom choose the same option.

Holland & Barrett, the health food chain, asks staff to keep shop doors open even though its website states, "We don't just want to be 'good for you' but 'good for our planet' as well." A spokesman said environmental considerations had to be "balanced with the needs and preferences of our customers", adding: "Our customers and potential customers far prefer a welcoming open-door policy."

Similarly, Waterstone's, whose website states, "We are committed to continually improving our environmental performance", said it had to balance such aspirations with commercial considerations.

Next said it, too, felt customers preferred open doors — although it left the final decision to individual managers, as did Fat Face and The Body Shop.

Campaigners argue that customers would take a different view if they knew that a large high street shop generates 10 tons of extra CO₂ a year if its doors are left open. French Connection said its open-door policy was under review because it had evidence that customers were now less likely to be deterred by closed doors.

Others who did not reply to requests for clarification of their policy included Gap, Monsoon and Topshop.

Close the Door, a pressure group, wants retailers to change. Jeannie Dawkins, its director, said: "Scientific evidence points to the link between CO₂ emissions and rapid global climate change. Why should shops get away with squandering large amounts of energy by heating the street?"

Part of the answer lies in the fact that the regulations controlling the energy efficiency of buildings apply only to their construction — not the way they are operated. Shops can be built or refurbished to the highest environmental standards but then run in wasteful ways without legal penalty.

Professor David Strong, a former head of the Building Research Establishment's environment division, said there was "rank hypocrisy" by retailers. "Open doors are hugely wasteful in energy terms — and there is nothing to stop retailers doing this. The hot air curtains make it worse, pouring energy into the street."