



Not Easy Being Green

What Kind of Sustainability Do Consumers Care About?

By Jackie DeLise

Is sustainability too forward thinking for the masses? Before you answer that, consider the basics and two rudimentary definitions:

- Sustainable design, graphic or otherwise, seeks to reduce impacts on the environment by relying on the use of renewable resources, among other measures.

- Sustainable practices do no lasting harm to the Earth's resources, valuing the survival of future generations over immediate needs.

It will take a sea change for the collective global populace to embrace the concept, but the notion of doing your part for the greater good, as a guiding principle, not only establishes an element of hope in this economic climate, but consumers today are looking for products, services, and retailers that they feel represent experiences that connect them more on a personal level.

To learn truths about the value of "green" to consumers, manufacturers must continue to be transparent and cautious about the claims they communicate, since the general pulse of con-

sumers today is that they are curious yet wary about how they can have an impact in improving the environment.

The term sustainability is not yet a household term and unfamiliar to almost half of U.S. consumers, according to new research from The Hartman Group. And many of those who do know what it means don't know for certain what companies or products are truly sustainable. Consumers do not know which companies support sustainable values and are uncertain about which products are sustainable.

While consumers want to do their part, they are confused around "green claims," need clarity and education, are not sure who to trust, where to get their information from, and how third party designations are substantiated. Despite the current economic climate, the personal care category usually maintains a consistent level of demand, because consumers deem their personal products to be a major part of their "essential buys."

Purchase in the personal care category is around products and brands that have more of an intimate, emotional con-

nection with the consumer for enhanced personal health and wellness. This is similar to food and beverage, and it is driven by the consumption and application aspects of the products which consumers consider important to their quality of life.

Packaging and brand recognition

A new study by the Greenwash-ing Forum at the University of Oregon uncovered that four out of five consumers continue to buy products that claim to be green. A study from the nonprofit, science-based research organization Green Seal and the Austin, TX-based socially conscious marketing firm Envi-roMedia found that about one in three consumers admit they don't have enough education to tell whether green product claims are true.

There remains a great willingness among consumers to want to buy these products—do their part in "being green"—as long as it's easy and accessible because they have the innate desire not to be wasteful. But the reality is that consumers are not making green a priority in their shopping behavior, or buying green, as much as some marketers believe.

When asked, they admit they are still making purchase decisions based on brand recognition—what they are familiar with and brand loyal to—and if they are going to shop green, they are engaging with the visual effectiveness of packaging to aid them in their selection.

Because cost is still such a key pro-



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hibitive factor in decisions to buy green (as many green products and packages are more expensive), the challenge lies in changing consumer behaviors and habits through education. Over time, a “high priority” will be directed toward those brands that reflect a more tangible end benefit to consumers. They want to be assured that their purchase has a direct impact, however small, on creating a healthier, holistic lifestyle for their families and themselves. They want to experience the results of buying green and understand what impact their purchases will have on their lifestyles and environment.

While consumers admit it is the “right thing” to do to buy green, the practical reality is that if consumers cannot see the benefits of their behavioral shift and additional expenditures, then they are not willing to do it on a consistent basis.

What consumers care about

In times like this, consumers naturally gravitate away from conspicuous consumption to a more “measured,” or

meaningful, consumption. After all, do consumers really need another variety of toothpaste, cereal, flavored tea, or detergent?

Patagonia has reduced their clothing line by 30%, proclaiming that people simply do not need that much stuff, and that their products are made to last. As the recession continues, consumers are less willing to buy items that do not offer some basis of personal value to them.

They are gravitating toward small indulgences with benefits or “rewards.”

Whether it's organic stone ground chocolate like Taza Chocolate, a relatively new brand on the chocolate market. The company is based in Massachusetts and makes stone ground chocolate in a variety of flavors and configurations. The chocolate is made using the method of traditional Mexican stone ground chocolate.

Taza's chocolate is as unique as the company, products, and packaging. The company makes a very distinct organic stone ground chocolate that it sells in the form of a small disc. The disc chocolate is sold in beautifully simple packaging that resembles wax paper in form. The packaging for Taza's chocolate discs is so simple it makes it unique and it stands out on store shelves from a distance.

Or how about a truly unique new product, Glowelle functional drink from Nestlé, which creates the “beauty juice” subcategory in the fast-growing “cosmeceutical” market with this dietary supplement. The premise was to garner the female consumer audience's attention, without making the product look like a perfume or too clinical like a medication. The results are a sleek glass bottle with a metal overcap and simple graphics.



Then, now, forever...

One could argue that since most of our evolutionary history was spent living sustainably, we should consider today's sustainability movement as a seismic cultural shift back to our ancestral basics. It's not just about the here and now, but what came before us and the unforeseen that lies ahead.

Packaging professionals agree that sustainability will only begin to make sense to the consumer when there is transparency and sensibility imbued into it. When a balance of Reduce, Reuse, Recycle and the beauty, efficacy, or functionality of a package are not compromised. And finally, it will make sense when consumers personally feel the emotional connection associated with their actions, and reap the tangible benefits of a healthier lifestyle and planet. ■



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