

SUSTAINABLE IS GOOD

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Shades of Green

BY JACKIE DeLISE

Marketing, packaging & branding all have critical roles in shaping sustainability in the eyes of the consumer.

"One of the things you have to remember about Sustainability is that it will take us all forever to accomplish." This is a quote by William McDonough, co-founder of the firm MBDC and co-author of the book Cradle to Cradle.

These words are not meant to discourage, but rather reflect the holistic manner in which the topic of Sustainability, needs to be approached

Today, there is a significant increase in the use of environmental claims in product marketing, including "green" claims concerning product packaging. Sellers and marketers frequently use terms such as "recyclable," "recycled content," "biodegradable," "degradable," "compostable," "sustainable" and "renewable" to make green claims about their packaging.

When such claims are used to sell products, consumer perception and substantiation issues may arise.

Also, in recent years, there has been an increase in the use of environmental seals and third-party certification programs purporting to verify the positive environmental impact of product packaging.

The trend towards verification is attributed to the rise in mandatory national reporting. Organizations that join these programs agree to voluntarily reduce their environmental impact beyond what is required by law.

In addition, these programs act as a powerful communication tool with consumers and corporate stakeholders, as the perception of the seal on a package denotes authenticity.

But consumers are savvy and may have varying interpretations of such seals and programs, and there is a great deal of confusion, false perceptions, and inflated reality.

So much so, that the FTC recently held a forum on Packaging specifically related to eco-marketing claims on packaging.

Packaging is an easy target for legislature, and now that the FTC is involved in creating mandates around the validity of claims, we still need break through innovation in materials, design and recycling to truly be on the path to sustainability.

While there is a raft of packaging needs to consider, e.g., on food ~ portability and shelf life ~ these needs do not always align with the environmental necessity of our planet.

For example, a package claims that the company is 100% wind-powered...what does this really mean and how does the message get carried through to the consumer!? What is the real, (in)tangible value of this claim!? And, why should the consumer care!?

Communicating Sustainability Effectively to the Consumer

There is a real, not perceived, knowledge gap. Marketers and designers must communicate with authenticity, transparency and sustainability ~ in a language that consumers understand.



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In the business of brand packaging design, visual imagery has become an emotional “short hand” to trigger Consumer buying motivations and purchase responses, so it is key to learn how to translate the new “Green” vocabulary into meaningful nomenclature

Let's further explore some terms from this new lexicon:

- The Three R's ~ in the world of “Green”, this is the standard for Reduce, Reuse, Recycle ~ to extract and reuse useful substances found in items that may be otherwise considered as waste
- Alternative Energy ~ energy derived from sources that have little or no impact on the environment and produce no net greenhouse gas emissions in generating electricity. Such sources include wind and solar.
- Biodegradable ~ a material that breaks down with the assistance of microorganism
- Carbon Footprint ~ the amount of carbon dioxide emissions created by a person or industry; and estimate of an individual's or organization's impact on the environment
- Compostable ~ a material that breaks down to become what is effectively dirt. It contains no toxins and can support plant life
- Fossil fuel
~ fuels containing methane, petroleum, coal and natural gas, which are derived from fossil matter. These are called "fossil" fuels, as it takes many years for them to be created in the natural environment. Burning fossil fuels creates greenhouse gases, which are a factor
- Green sheen ~ similar to Green wash, has been used to describe organizations which attempt to appear that they are adopting practices beneficial to the environment
- Renewable resources ~ those that can be replenished, so they are not permanently depleted; alternate-energy sources such as solar or wind power instead of nonrenewable oil, or fast-growing plants like bamboo
- Repurpose
~ to take what may be otherwise a waste item and use it for another purpose - e.g a coffee jar becomes a jar for keeping nails (reclaimed or recycled materials are rescued from the garbage dump and turned into new products (plastic bottles reborn as fleece jackets; old magazines become packaging)
- Sustainable ~ indefinitely viable, capable of maintaining productivity or usefulness in the long term.
Sustainable design, graphic or otherwise, seeks to reduce impacts on the environment by relying on the use of renewable resources, among other measures. It employs practices that do no lasting harm to the Earth's resources, valuing the survival of future generations over immediate needs!

Sustainable Design - A Visible Issue



There is growing pressure around sustainable design, because unlike the climate, it is a visible issue.

The consumer has contact with packaging every day and contributes to the growing problem of waste through packaging. Our research has found that not only do consumers want to simplify their daily lives through “low impact” living, they do not want or need all the unnecessary packaging that surround their brands; they perceive it as extraneous to the product.

And, there are some glaringly obvious disconnects: e.g., food with a 6 month shelf life in packages that last 6,000 years. Now you not only have solid waste but also greenhouse gases!

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Reducing the environmental footprint of packaging requires the cooperation of the entire value chain.

Recent meetings at a variety of Fortune 100 clients resulted in clients sharing their corporate positioning on going green, but the reality is in this economy is that they are not ready to fully commit investments toward "going green".

How Do we Move Forward?

So, how do we change this? Can we change this? Again, consumer education and a clear communications hierarchy through labeling may help pressure the corporations into action. Perhaps, if the consumer really understood which claims were truthful and viable, this would become a beneficial point of difference to drive the corporations into making the investments.

Another route would be some sort of government incentive to go green.

The corporations who had the foresight to invest in removing trans fats before there was pressure to, found themselves in a profitable position once the consumers were educated better.

Now that we understand some of the terms that are being used in today's vocabulary, how real should our expectations for a greener world through packaging be?

What do we have to do to design against sustainable packaging?

Actually, the design is easy. In fact, only a year ago my group had a package design prominently displayed at a world renowned packaging show because of its eco-friendly design.

But this was a concept. No different than the concept cars at the auto show that run on water instead of gasoline. The truth is, the design is there, the technology is there, but the funding...what is the price for a company to make sustainability a part of their corporate culture? The price of the planet...but that is long term strategic thinking and most companies are not willing to invest in the short term (now) to get there.

Lastly, in terms of brand icons as cultural nomenclature ~ a new consumer language has been established, and it speaks of clarity in protecting the environment, reducing conspicuous consumption and our footprint, creating a healthy balance between consumerism and capitalism, and caring for our living earth (one package at a time)!

"In the long term, the economy and the environment are the same thing. If it's un-environmental, it is un-economical. That is the rule of nature." Mollie Beattie Former Director U.W.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Jackie DeLise is Vice President New Business & Brand Development of Zunda Group LLC. Zunda Design Group creates brands that inspire, by designing visual identity and packaging that evoke emotions and connect consumers to their brand, ultimately captivating attention and purchase intent at retail. Jackie can be reached at j.delise@zundagroup.com.