

Environmentalism And The Marketing Of Consumer Products

**Linking Corporate Responsibility With Sales
Opportunity**

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Introduction: Consumer Desires And Environmental Needs.

It may be a natural reaction to imagine sinister motives in companies' efforts to tie their products to the environment. After all, the manufacturing and distribution of products like soaps, cereals, toothpaste, radios, computer printers and automobiles are processes which require numerous environmental resources to compile and package, energy to produce and transport and landfill space for ultimate disposal.

Having ready-made consumer products easily accessible to us also requires that we use the environment with every trip to the supermarket, mall or mass merchandiser. However, because of the pervasiveness of consumer product marketing in the modern era, efforts by companies to "green" their products could also appear to be an entirely logical and natural reaction to the challenges and opportunities of our time.

Modern consumers appear to have more opportunities and reasons to become more ecologically minded in their purchases. As such, they owe it to the environment they value to demand ecologically sound products, featuring safe design and formulation, minimal packaging, and manufacturing that occurs in a non-destructive manner. Businesses, in turn, owe it to consumers (and the environment) to deliver goods and services in a way that meets these demands. The corporate world has responded in a wide variety of ways. Today, with the modern environmental movement now more than three decades old, a seemingly limitless number of companies are trying to help consumers along by making and selling more ecologically friendly products through a practice broadly defined as environmental marketing.

What exactly is environmental or “green” marketing? A look at the wide variety of writing on the subject reveals numerous commonalities in definition, all relating to practicing and communicating environmentally advantageous practices at any or all points in a product’s lifecycle. This includes material sourcing and manufacture, to distribution and sale and usage and disposal. Another definition says environmental marketing is “The holistic management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying the needs of consumers and society in an environmentally responsible way.” (Peattie and Charter 1994 cited in Pujari and Wright 1996). Other modern definitions suggest a proactive role on the part of companies and that they should not only be fully aware of environmental impacts of their activities but also use practices that reduce such impact. (Di Benedetto and Chandran 1995).

Evidence indicates that, like the ocean’s tide, consumers’ inclination toward being environmentally conscious in their purchase decisions has ebbed and flowed in recent decades. However, a historical perspective shows that consumers—and the corporations that serve them—are gradually becoming more ecologically conscious and that this focus has moved from a trend to a core value for many. But before one determines the overall merits of what is known as environmental or green marketing programs, it is important—or at least interesting—to note that before environmentalism could be used as a marketing tool, the concept of environmentalism itself first had to be “sold” to the public.

A little history

Earth Day 1970 is often cited as the birth date of the environmental movement or at least a key date in its development (Dunlap and Catton 1979; Hinchman and Hinchman 1989). In reality, efforts to conserve resources, reduce pollution, protect species and other ecological initiatives have been part of the American landscape at least since the 1700s (Kuzmiak 1991). The early half of the twentieth century saw a number of pioneering efforts to conserve forest land, protect endangered species and reduce air and water pollution. This includes major environmental achievements during the FDR administration in the 1940s

including the U.S Fish & Wildlife Service, Tennessee Valley Authority, Civilian Conservation Corp and aggressive expansion of the National Park System (Kuzmiak 1991).

But the real acceleration began in the 1960s, spurred and encouraged by President Lyndon Johnson's wife, Claudia (better known as "Ladybird"). Anyone who grew up in the late 60s is also quite familiar with commercials featuring an American Indian happening upon a modern city and then becoming teary eyed at the site of callously tossed rubbish. Efforts such as these tugged at American heartstrings at the end of a decade that saw a surge in activism. In addition, continuing campaigns that said "every litter bit hurts" or "you've got to pitch in to clean up America" no doubt helped to sensitize consumers to the part that individuals play in the larger natural environment. By the time of that first Earth Day, the U.S. populous was both sold on the importance of environmentalism and backed by governments ready to take action on its behalf. (Dunlap and Catton 1979; Kuzmiak 1991).

During the 1970s, environmentalism gained solid footing in the U.S. and much of the western world. The movement broadened through extensions like the Deep Ecology movement (Hinchman and Hinchman 1989). The 1970s also produced a flurry of environmental initiatives as activism was met by welcome initiatives from the Nixon, Ford and Carter administrations. First came creation of the now famous EPA Environmental Protection Agency followed by other legislation such as the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act and the Environmental Pesticide Control Act (Crosby 1995).

The 1980s' focus on economic and strategic issues combined with a feeling of progress in the 1970s to force the environment into the background of national priorities. However, by the end of that decade, momentum began to swing back toward environmental interests. This reemerging environmental focus was precipitated by the public image of an unfriendly Reagan Administration interior secretary, James A. Watt, and widely publicized ecological disasters like the Exxon Valdez spilling of thousands of barrels of oil and the well known "garbage barge" that remained at sea. Indeed, President Reagan's successor,

George H.W. Bush pledged to serve the nation as an “environmental President.” It seemed that stage was set for another renewal of environmentalism, beginning with Earth Day 1990. This time marketers would tap deeply into the new energy of the environmental movement (Ottman 1992; Mackoy et al. 1995) and there would be an explosion of environmental products appearing to meet consumer demand (Mayer et al. 2001).

Using The Environment To Sell

The environment might have been an important cause through the 1960s and 1970s, but by the time of the 1990s, it was becoming an essential part of doing business for many product marketers.

In 1986, just slightly over 1.0% of consumer products introduced to the market made any kind of environmental claim and as of 1989 that number had crept to a little over 4.0%. Beginning with 1990 and continuing through the decade the average would be well over 10%. In the area of household products, the figures are more significant, growing from 2.7% in 1986 to over 25% or higher through the balance of the 1990s (Mayer et al. 2001).

It is clear that companies have long used the environment as a borrowed-interest device in the selling of their products for decades. The ironically named detergent, Tide has been a Procter & Gamble trademark for decades. And companies like Phillip Morris, Honda and Harley Davidson have long portrayed pristine, outdoor imagery in both advertisements and packaging articles detailing environmental or green marketing seem to be limited to that period after 1990. Whether in names like “Irish Spring” or “Biolage,” margarines that invoke “mother nature” or petroleum products marketed under natural symbols such as the “Shell”, the ecology has played an important role in adding luster to product names. For years, these environmental associations helped build brand image even though they were in all likelihood simply borrowed interest devices—ornamentation used in the same way as beautiful faces, bright colors and other design elements.

In contrast are the more concrete efforts to manufacture and sell products that are good for the environment or take significant steps to minimize environmental impact—and to do so in a way that appeals to the environmental consciousness of consumers. In the 1970s, 3M introduced its Pollution Prevention Pays program to combine strategies of reformulation, reduction, re-use and recycling. This effort not only cut down on pollutants going into the biosphere it increased the company's profits (Neace 1995). To be sure, there were efforts to associate environmental consciousness with the sales of products, but doing so as a defined, organized marketing program seems to have gained greatest momentum with the newest wave of environmentalism that occurred beginning in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Some argue that the 1990s enabled greater linkage between the environment and marketing of environmental or green qualities because the baby boom generation had for the first time emerged as the primary consumer force (Ottman 2003). Earlier programs for national environmental seals of approval could be seen as early as 1978 with West Germany's Blue Angel and then with similar programs in the 1980s in Canada and Japan (Mayer et al. 2001).

Over the years environmental marketing has been manifested in a number of ways. It tends however to take place on several fundamental levels:

1. First party claims by the manufacturer which appear in advertisements, packaging claims and other communications (Mayer et al. 2001)
2. Seals or third party endorsements such as Germany's Blue Angel, Energy-Star and others (Mayer et al. 2001)
3. Public relations activities, institutional communications, sponsorships and environmental philanthropy (Ottman 1992)

The seal or endorsement programs represent a form of third-party endorsement programs and standards in the U.S. have been slower in coming than in other western countries such as Germany or Canada. On the other hand, the U.S. has been a leader in guidelines and regulations for the types of claims that can be

made in first-party claims or those statements made in packaging, advertising and other communications by the manufacturer (Mayer et al 2001). As environmentalism has transformed from an activist, youth-driven movement to an accepted way of life, product environmental claims are expected to be genuine, honest and provable. Whether on packaging, in advertising or on their websites, numerous mainstream companies engage in at least some form of environmental marketing activity.

Uniting Corporate Values With Consumer Demand

With the 1990s, there came a rush to market products to an increasingly ecological aware public. More than 50% of consumers were reading labels to determine if they were environmentally safe or seeking out products and packaging made with recycled materials (Ottman 1992). By the middle of the decade, 75% of consumers identified themselves as also being environmentalists (Mackoy 1995). Companies like McDonalds responded to consumer pressures and inquires by taking environmental steps like the elimination of Styrofoam clamshell packaging. (Svoboda 1995).

Those with long-standing innate environmental qualities were quick to tout their eco-friendliness. For example, Arm & Hammer products and others ranging from toothpastes, deodorants and beverages sought to intrigue the consumer by presenting their long-standing environmental qualities (Ottman 1992). Indeed, some companies such as Toms Of Maine, Starbucks and Nisbet Oysters have always made unity with environmental considerations a primary focus of their activities (Nisbet Oysters 2004; Starbucks 2004; Toms Of Maine 2004). Firms such as these have demonstrated that there is a great deal of money to be made by appealing to the social consciousness of consumers, of which environmentalism plays a big part (Chappell 1993).

Tom's of Maine Founder, Tom Chappell, has long been an advocate of products that are friendly to the environment throughout their lifecycles. His own writing (1993) reveals a willingness not only to do right by the environment but to enjoy business success as a result: "I wanted Tom's to become successful to

prove that there is another way of doing business in America—to manage by values, to care about people and the environment, and still run up and down the court with the big boys and make money.”

Chappell had long been committed to environmentally sound products, but his devotion to the issue seemed to gain added momentum during his participation in a graduate program at Harvard Divinity School. His education had taught him the importance of managing according to his strong sense of values and desire to manage for the common good. Commitment to the ecology seemed to Chappell a natural and important part of this component. Not only did he extend his green philosophies to his personal life, he made it something he attempted to give to his religion.

“At the Triennial Convention of the Episcopal Church in Phoenix in 1991, I sat on an environmental subcommittee with Father Allen who happens to be a Lakota Sioux. Our task was to draft proposed legislation for the Churches position on the environmental crisis. We stunned the committee by beefing up a draft of a minor piece of legislation and making our new points the focus of the legislation that eventually passed—committing the Episcopal Church for the first time ever to the environmental movement” (Chappell 1993).

Chappell’s values apparently mirror similar sentiments in business and among the buying public. In the US and other Western countries, consumers are coming to view environmental and social responsibility as a given (Karna et al. 2003). Further, the green marketing movement has given business people a way to integrate their personal values into their work (Ottman 1992). Now, in the early part of the 21st century, the adaptation of environmental principles by market leaders such as H.J. Heinz, SCJohnson, Procter & Gamble, Canon and Ford provides some proof that the practice has long since transformed from a movement to mainstream.

But some might ask what the reward is for these businesses. In fact, there is evidence that environmental messages in advertising and packaging do in fact lead to increased sales. Moreover, a sizable number of environmental consumers indicate willingness to pay more for products they perceive to be

more environmentally focused (Ottman 1992; Mayer et al. 2001).

It should be noted that a green marketing advantage, however, is rarely enough to sell a product all by itself. But when all things are equal, green attributes can hold sway with the consumer when a non-environmental product is also being considered (Ottman 1995, 2003). Environmental marketing is something that can add luster to an overall corporate image as well. Firms enjoy significant advantages in terms of reputation and goodwill, something that benefits corporations in terms of overall market value (Miles and Covin 2000). Speaking of marketing and other product-oriented activities, HJ Heinz' Vice President of investor relations, Jack Runkle says, "Rigorous implementation of our Environmental Management Systems not only ensures compliance with regulatory agencies, but also helps reduce cost and enhance our long-term performance" (HJ Heinz 2002).

Of course, it is important to point out that the quality of being environmentally responsible tends to work hand in hand with ethical practice in other areas including advertising truthfully and demonstrating social consciousness in a range of areas (Miles and Covin 2000). Companies that tend to place a high value on their personnel and place in the larger social order tend to be more likely to value the environment (Stein 2004). This can be seen in small companies that have long served dedicated markets made up of health conscious, environmental consumers (Chappell 1993; Toms Of Maine 2004; Starbucks 2004) but even in large well known consumer products companies like H.G. Heinz (2002) and Procter & Gamble (2003) which, for example, states a commitment to helping coffee growers in South America and other regions to maintain and improve their livelihoods in the face of oversupply problems which typically wreak havoc on prices. Starbucks (2004) demonstrates similar commitment and efforts on behalf of its growers.

The Many Faces Of Environmental Marketing

Environmental marketing as a practice is virtually as rich as all of the consumer products category. The degree of emphasis varies, too from those companies

that tout limited eco-friendliness in a way that borders on hyperbole to those with established environmental products and categories that place little marketing emphasis on their green qualities. As a sign of the times, even behemoth marketers like P&G work hard to communicate an environmental focus (Procter & Gamble 2003). And companies like Ford provide another example, using corporate websites to communicate environmental initiatives from tapping landfill gas emissions for energy to partnering with major oil companies create synergies between fuel innovation and engine technology (Ford 2004).

Claims range from natural content to high degree of recyclability. There is also the “all natural” assertion which implies not only a health benefit for the consumer but that any agriculture or manufacturing processes were done without the aid of environmentally destructive fertilizers, fuels or other pollutants. Statements about products’ environmental nature also frequently relate to the fact that they were manufactured without animal testing, or that resources were gathered caught in a way that is humane—seafood harvesting that doesn’t harm other undersea creatures, for example. Not surprisingly, key messages in the marketing of many green consumer products relate to reduced energy consumption, protection of the ozone layer and natural resource conservation.

While many products gained their environmental focus as a result of companies’ efforts to meet the demands of their customer bases, it is also worth noting that other environmental claims owe their emphasis to companies’ reactions to activist and public interest activity. Heinz for example introduced its dolphin-safe tuna following a long nationwide boycott of tuna producers in the early 1990s. What’s more, it did so under the guidance of the activist Earth Island Institute (Ottman 1992).

Truthfulness And Other Ethical Considerations

Growing legions of environmentally conscious consumers create a natural incentive for companies to meet their product needs. After all, it is fundamental to the field of marketing to identify consumer needs, create products that fulfill those needs and then actively work to communicate product advantages. But in the

area of environmental benefits, such claims are deserving of close scrutiny. For example, is it ethical for a company to advertise that its products use “no CFCs” (Mayer et al. 2001) when CFCs have been outlawed for decades in consumer products? Others might ask whether it is more ethical to extol a minor environmental advantage just to capture the marketing luster of having a green product or to simply market a product on its performance merits, leaving the minor advantage as a “copy point” (Polonsky 1998).

Some might argue that the whole notion of connecting the environment to marketing opportunity is a perversion of sorts. They might be just as likely to view a company that over-hypes a tenuous or limited environmental benefit on an even (or even diminished) moral plane when compared to a company that offers no environmental advantage and makes no environmental claim (Polonsky 1998; Mayer et al. 2001)

For its part, Greenpeace puts forward a few guidelines relating to whether green marketing is sincere or mainly “greenwash”. Interestingly, its four primary criteria relate to 1) core business, 2) advertising practice, 3) research and development and 4) environmental lobbying record. In discussing the first point, the organization argues that a company primarily involved in an activity that is destructive or polluting cannot possibly be sincere in its green marketing efforts. And on the point of advertising practice, Greenpeace indicates that companies spending sizeable expenditures on a green product while continuing to do less environmental practices as a whole are also guilty of greenwashing. (Greenpeace 1997).

According to Nazareth College Business Professor Roy J. Stein, concern over whether it is ethical to promote an environmental feature or advantage misses the point altogether. He feels for example that if companies and consumers do come together in relationships that ultimately prove beneficial to the environment, then results are more important than motivation (Stein 2004).

It May Move Consumers But Does It Benefit The Environment?

Marketing is essential to the identification and satisfaction of consumer wants. As such, it defines what is sold, how and where. Its ability to play a role in meeting consumer needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs is essential to sustainability (Mayer et al 2001; Callicot et al 1999). Just as environmental marketing efforts reflect certain values-centered characteristics within companies, consumers of environmental products fit profiles. For example, consumer characteristics such as youth, advanced education and political liberalism are often characteristics associated with environmentally conscious consumers. (Ottman 1992; Dunlap and Catton 1979).

For most people, the heart of environmental marketing concerns and, in fact larger ecological issues as well lies in the notion of sustainable development. While some argue that the more balanced approach to the environment demands curbing of the “religion of consumerism” (Sivaraska 1994), it is also important to consider that consumer-focused societies have emerged in conjunction with other structures that have enabled the earth to accommodate larger and larger populations. Understanding the realities of a consumer-driven economy it is apparent that the manufacture, usage and disposal of products is likely to continue. Ours is simply a society that does not live off the land any longer.

Companies that make products that reduce landfill usage or minimize air or waterborne pollutants either in manufacture, use or disposal, are making obvious contributions to the ecosystem. The question remains as to what degree any one given marketers greening contributes to the long-term health of the environment. But when viewed from a broader perspective, it seems natural to commend those marketing claims which reflect genuine improvements to products in terms of improving or at least minimizing damage to the environment (Mayer et al. 2001).

It should be pointed out that various state and federal regulatory agencies also play an important role in the equation as well, particularly in holding companies accountable to their claims and in encouraging overall environmental compliance. Some, such as the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), regulate both

activity and product-oriented communication. In the U.S. there has been general agreement that the FTC's guidelines for environmental product claims and communication have been effective.

Other governmental bodies regulate and encourage performance, too. For example, in 1992 the California Air Resources Board (CARB) awarded SCJohnson an innovative product exemption for its Glade Plug-ins, which reduces (VOC) emissions compared to similar competitive products. In the years since then, the company has received numerous others—more than half of all those issued by CARB (SCJohnson 2004). Regulatory bodies such as these benefit the process by not only preventing detrimental activities but also by providing the advantage of marketable recognition to companies that meet or exceed tough standards. The result of combining consumer and corporate and governmental interests are processes that produce less pollution in manufacturing, minimized and recyclable packaging and cleaner more ecological practices throughout the value chain.

Taking A Holistic View

Few things tie together our culture of consumption with our concern for the environment like the idea of environmental marketing—and the way it can link businesses and consumers, manufacturers and vendors in beneficial fashion. The idea that companies work to manufacture “greener” less destructive products and use available media communicate them with language that conveys a strong sense of environmental and social value (Starbucks 2004; Toms Of Maine 2004; Nisbet Oysters 2004) creates not only a strong sales message for the given company's product, but reinforces positive environmental values across the board.

A company that makes coffee filters or napkins without bleach and then explains the environmental advantage, is not only helping to sell its products, it is educating as well. Others who seek to cut down landfill space with and discover ways to make diapers “super absorbent” (Di Benedetto and Chandron 1995) not only cut waste, but also gain another perceivable advantage among consumers.

The alignment with environmental marketing with other issues such as personal health and economic considerations could mean that the practice is likely to continue for reasons outside the realm of environmental stewardship.

Ours has been defined as a consumer culture, characterized by a buy-use-dispose cycle that affects both individual and social behavior (Mackoy et al. 1995). If one views this underpinning and surrounding popular culture as an inherent danger to the environment then it is perfectly logical to seek ways to mitigate their effects. Until we can do without or do with less, it is important to look for relationships that help us consume less destructively. Businesses and the consumers they serve should seek to build relationships that help us live our lives today but that keep faith with coming generations. We should contribute positively to the goal of sustainability.

“Our ecology should be a deep ecology—not only deep, but universal. There is pollution in our consciousness. Television, films and newspapers are forms of pollution for us and our children. They sow seeds of violence and anxiety in us and pollute our consciousness, just as we destroy our environment by farming with chemicals, clear-cutting the trees, and polluting the water. We need to protect the ecology of the Earth and the ecology of the mind, or this kind of violence and recklessness will spill over into even more areas of life.” (Nhat Hanh 2003).

Tom’s of Maine’s Chappell likens his companies search for a place in the natural and corporate world as a process of discovering how to manage by values which is inspired by the Buddhist Middle Way concept. (Chappell 1993).

If ecological sustainability means meeting the needs of human beings without compromising the health of our ecosystems (Callicott and Mumford 1997 cited by Callicott et al. 1999) then environmental marketing has a significant role to play in the future. Indeed, values that acknowledge a company’s place in and debt to the larger world seem to be at the core of many environmental product and marketing initiatives. Further, most committed green marketers employ policies that run deep through their organizations while also accounting for the needs of various stakeholders along the way. Such needs can be as simple as giving consumers products that meet their needs without damaging the

environment. In other cases, stakeholders' expectations can be more complex. A bank or other financial institution may be concerned that they are exposed to a high degree of risk when lending companies that compete in an environmentally sensitive industries (Polonsky 1995).

Procter & Gamble (2003) acknowledges dozens of external stakeholder groups including the news media, stockholders, retailers, wholesalers, consumers and consumer organizations along with numerous governmental bodies and trade associations. Retailers are naturally a key component in the marketing of consumer products and many have long stated their environmental policies. Home Depot is an example of companies that use an external resource to monitor the environmental marketing claims of every product they sell (Ottman 1992).

Companies such as Japan's Canon Inc. views the needs of stakeholders as essential in their practice of the philosophy of *kyosei*, which emphasizes the company's commitment to simultaneously working for continued existence and growth of the company through harmonious relationship with society and striving to advance the common good. "Putting *kyosei* into practice requires that we maintain good relationships with not only our customers and local communities—those are givens—but also with nations and the environment. It demands we fulfill our social responsibilities" (Canon Inc. 2004).

Conclusion: Sustaining The Ideal

Many years after the dramatic surge in environmental marketing efforts began, there is scant evidence or systematically collected data on precisely how environmental marketing improves the ecology or the general social welfare (Mayer et al. 2001). Yet it is difficult to find anyone willing to argue that using more environmentally sensitive consumer products does not have an ecological benefit. It appears that people take both the products they buy and their relationship with the environment personally, factors that make for a natural opportunity for any company working to research, manufacture and market green products.

If the process is not already well underway, then we have to move from the point where environmental marketing is seen not only as a trend or technique, but as an essential way of doing business—both in how individuals act as consumers and how they behave as business people. Indeed, Greenpeace in its watchdog capacity says that it is essential for business and industry to play an active role moving the planet onto a sustainable future and that environmental marketing activities play a part in this.

It does however caution urge vigilance in holding businesses accountable for honest efforts rather than merely using their marketing muscle to greenwash dirty practices (Greenpeace 1997). Interestingly, such values are consistent with statements like those made by Ford Motor Company (Ford 2004) or Canon Inc. (Canon 2003).

There should be no single more unifying force between companies and the consumers they serve. Creating and serving customers in a leaner, more efficient manner can also frequently have the benefit of creating bottom-line savings as well. With regulatory bodies and consumer and environmental groups fulfilling their natural watch-dog advocacy roles, the practice will have not only the demands of making credible, provable claims but the benefits of legitimacy that flow naturally from the practice.

The fact that the environmental prudence can often align with the consumers desire for health and industry's desire for economic efficiency is also something that should logically drive increased emphasis on ecologically sound products. Environmental marketing is not something that should be viewed as uniting businesses desire for efficiency and reductionist manufacturing with ecological beneficence throughout the value chain.

A commitment to genuine environmentalism on the part of companies demands not only that they use ecological practices as a marketing edge but that they back it up by manufacturing in an environmentally responsible way, purchasing from non-polluting vendors and distributing and selling in an ecologically sound fashion. Indeed, such practices appear to be becoming increasingly mainstream. Businesses should be proactive in matters relating to

the environment, rather than reactive and responding only to government or regulatory pressure (Polonsky et al. 1998). In doing so, these firms would be demonstrating a credible, sincere long-term commitment to the environment. Over the past 30 years certain core attitudes have shifted regarding the natural world. For example, littering has moved from being almost socially acceptable to deviant (Mackoy 1995). Similarly, the practice of marketing in ecologically sound fashion must become the norm by being a routine way of doing business.

The role of consumers cannot be overstated here. As with all business energy, the focus of product manufacturers is always on those who ultimately make the purchase decision: the consumer (Ottman 1992; Polonsky 1998; Mayer et al. 2001). As long as the buying public demands a greater commitment to environmental friendliness in the products they buy and back their actions both by cleaner living and support of environmental policies in government, it will drive a commitment to a sustainable environment on the part of all product manufacturers. Such a focus can only serve to improve our relationship with the natural world.

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