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## Deflating a Myth

### Consumers aren't as devoted to the planet as you wish they were

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-By Mark Dolliver



These days, marketers have the whole world in their hands. Or do they?

It sounds so lovely: Companies rescue our put-upon planet by making their operations environmentally sound and offering green products. And they get rich as consumers reward them for this virtuous behavior. There is even a ready-made phrase for it, "doing well by doing good," which no doubt has been reduced to the acronym DWBDG in many corporate memos.

The catch, to judge by research we'll get to in a moment, is that consumers won't necessarily be eager to play along. Companies will have to get greener, all right, whether they want to or not. But for their labors to resonate profitably with consumers, they'll have to deal with an admixture of skepticism and indifference, while also figuring out which audiences are most receptive to their efforts. And they'll need to cope with the fact that increasing numbers of their competitors are doing the same thing.

In these circumstances, marketers can't afford a naive assumption that consumers will gratefully repay them for their troubles on behalf of the planet. They'll need to be smarter about the often-inhospitable environment in which they're operating.

#### How green are consumers?

The challenge marketers face is partly a function of consumers' own equivocal commitment to the environment. Surveys do consistently show people voicing strong support for environmental protection. In a typical example, when asked last winter by Mediamark Research & Intelligence to "rate how important preserving the environment is as a guiding principle in your life," 63 percent of men and 64 percent of women deemed it "very important." Likewise, a Washington Post/ABC News/Stanford University poll last spring found 94 percent of respondents saying they were willing (including 50 percent "very willing") "personally to change some of the things you do in order to improve the environment." But this is the sort of subject about which it's awfully easy for people to pay lip service when a pollster asks whether they'd like to save the planet from despoliation.

So, how much are mainstream consumers in earnest when they describe their actions and attitudes on this issue? "No question there is a lot of 'aspirational' commitment, as opposed to real commitment, by consumers at this point," says Mike Lawrence, executive vp of corporate responsibility at Boston-based Cone, an Omnicom company whose specialties include cause-related branding. "People are more willing to change their lightbulbs than their lifestyles." But Lawrence adds that people are "open to practical environmental ideas they can implement, albeit with as little pain as possible." And he regards this as a first step that augurs more involvement. "Behavior change is a journey. There's a lot more to come, to be driven by education, the changing cost of things and regulation," he says.

When it asks about specifics of green behavior, polling tends to confirm that mainstream consumers have learned to talk the talk but are still in the baby-steps phase of walking the walk. A [new TNS survey](#) found just 26 percent of Americans saying they

"actively seek environmentally friendly products." In a global poll by Nielsen (Adweek's parent company), about half the respondents said they'd forgo packaging provided for "convenience purposes" if it would help the environment, but only 27 percent would give up packaging designed to keep products "clean and untouched by others." More broadly, in a Gallup poll fielded prior to this year's Earth Day, fewer than one-third of respondents (28 percent) claimed to have made "major changes" in their own shopping and living habits over the past five years to help protect the environment.

None of this, however, means consumers will cut much slack to companies that are conspicuously neglectful in their behavior. The irony, as noted in a recent report by BBMG (a New York- and San Francisco-based branding and integrated-marketing firm that works with "values-driven" companies and organizations), is that consumers are more demanding of the corporate sector than of themselves. Think of it as a case of individuals outsourcing environmental responsibility to big business. "We do see a 'green-action gap,' where consumers expect more from companies than they actually do themselves," says Raphael Bemporad, a founding partner of BBMG. And that leads to one of the asymmetries in consumer attitudes: People who are tepid about rewarding virtuous companies could well be energetic about punishing the unvirtuous. A Cone poll last spring found 85 percent of Americans saying they'd consider switching brands due to "a company's negative corporate responsibility practices."

### **The environmental hierarchy**

In any case, marketers need to keep in mind that Americans care about some aspects of the environment more than others. And it doesn't play out the way you might expect. Despite the life-or-death urgency surrounding much discussion of global warming, that issue ranks relatively low on consumers' hierarchy of concerns. How come? While noting that consumers care about the wider world, Bemporad says they're "looking at issues first through the lens of how it affects them personally -- their health, their safety, their neighborhood." When a Gallup poll this March asked adults how much they "personally worry" about some environmental problems, 53 percent said they worry a great deal about pollution of drinking water, and nearly as many said the same about "contamination of soil and water by toxic waste" (50 percent) and "pollution of rivers, lakes and reservoirs" (50 percent). Global warming lagged well down the list (37 percent). On a broader question about environmental and social problems, a BBMG survey yielded similar results.

Surprisingly, the percentage of adults saying they personally worry a great deal about global warming hasn't changed much during the past two decades of Gallup's polling on the topic. It's up a couple percentage points from 1989, but down a few points since 2000. So, the consumer climate may be less receptive than one might think to corporate efforts focused on global warming, and more receptive to efforts focused on something like helping to clean up a specific river.

### **Looking for Earth Mothers**

It's often said that people become more concerned about the environment when they have children and thus feel a long-term stake in the fate of the planet. But we also know that having kids can channel people's attention more intensely on their immediate household. The confluence of these factors makes mothers a promising audience for green-marketing efforts, but only if these are properly focused.

When a mother is willing to sacrifice some convenience for the sake of the planet, it's partly because she feels her offspring are scrutinizing her behavior. "Her child may come home from school wanting to know how the family is contributing to the eco-effort," says Cheryl Wilbur, director of strategic insights for The Parenting Group (whose publications include *Parenting* magazine). Thus, the mother feels "the responsibility of setting a good example by doing the right thing."

Even so, a mother will be most responsive to green marketing efforts that present a tangible benefit for her own household. A poll of mothers for Parenting magazine's Mom Matters newsletter (using its MomConnection panel) found 71 percent agreeing that "Moms are more likely than non-moms to go green IF they have information about how it will benefit their family." And they aren't necessarily getting it. "The missing piece of the puzzle for eco-marketers is, frankly, marketing," the newsletter says in analyzing its research findings. As Wilbur adds, "Over 70 percent of MomConnection panel members we surveyed felt that advertising messaging doesn't speak to them, that there is a 'failure to communicate,' with due respect to Cool Hand." It's not that mothers are indifferent to broader issues. However, to trigger action, says Wilbur, "you need to bring it down to the personal: How does this affect my family, and what can I do?"

### **Older but greener**

If marketers assume their eco-efforts will appeal most strongly to younger consumers, they could be hugging the wrong tree. A good deal of research finds that older folks are the more serious about green behavior. A [Harris Poll](#) fielded prior to this year's Earth Day, provides an indication of this. Given that Matures are more likely to be homeowners, it's not surprising that they're more likely than Echo Boomers to have bought energy-efficient appliances (52 percent vs. 32 percent). But they're also likelier than the young folks to be buying more locally grown food (35 percent vs. 23 percent) and to have stopped using bottled water (27 percent vs. 23 percent).

Maybe young adults are too consumed by their own coming-of-age problems to have much surplus for active eco-responsibility. In a recent Harvard Institute of Politics poll of 18-24-year-olds, respondents were more likely to say the cost of tuition is "very relevant" to them than to say the same about the environment (49 percent to 31 percent).

All of this is reflected in the propensity to buy green products (or not). While noting a strong commitment to green goods among boomers, an AARP Services/Focalyst report said it's "even more prevalent among Matures than Boomers, and actually appears to correlate directly with age." Old folks may simply take this matter (as they do many matters) more seriously than young folks.

### 'Conscious consumers'

The most obvious market for green marketing efforts is people who are already attuned to environmental matters and to corporate social responsibility in general. But this is also an especially tough audience. The TNS study cited above segmented consumers by "shades of green," and those classified as Eco Centrics (i.e., among the most highly concerned about the environment) were described as "generally scornful of companies' green efforts, viewing corporate green initiatives as nothing more than marketing tactics."

Discussing what his firm refers to as "conscious consumers," BBMG's Bemporad says these seriously environmentalist consumers "are looking deeper" than the companies' own claims. "They want to know the reality behind the buzz," he says, and are looking to third-party sources "to discover if brands are backing their eco-friendly words with authentic socially responsible action." He points to the emergence of "box-turners" -- that is, "consumers who are looking beyond the marketing claims to take a harder look at what's behind the label."

This constituency is important beyond its relatively modest numbers. If these people aren't satisfied that a company is living up to its claims, they'll make enough ruckus that even not-so-conscious consumers get wind of it. BBMG polling finds 38 percent of all consumers include online search engines among their regular sources of information about products, so many will pick up negative blogosphere chatter about a company that has gotten on the wrong side of eco-activists.

### Hostile to business

Whatever the audience they're trying to reach with green marketing efforts, corporations must realize they're swimming against a turbid current of anti-corporate sentiment. An Associated Press/Stanford University/Ipsos Public Affairs poll fielded last fall gives a glimpse at how Americans view corporations' environmental stewardship. The poll found a derisory number of people saying American business does a great deal (3 percent) or a lot (4 percent) to help the environment.

These attitudes reflect a basic distrust of corporations. In recent Economist/YouGov/Polimetrix polling, 2 percent of Americans said they have a great deal of trust in the people who run big companies; 30 percent said they don't trust them "at all." While companies see themselves doing well by doing good, this butts up against the fact that consumers don't like to see them "doing well." In the same poll, 28 percent said they "agree strongly" and 36 percent that they "tend to agree" with the statement, "Large, successful companies make excessive profits at the expense of their employees and customers."

This is the backdrop against which "greenwashing" has become a household word among eco-activists. And it threatens to become part of ordinary consumers' vocabulary as well. "We do not believe greenwashing has yet become a mainstream consumer issue," says Cone's Lawrence, "but it is an emerging one, with watchdogs, Web sites and cloudy skies ahead." As BBMG's Bemporad emphasizes, "Authenticity is more important than ever, and there will be a huge backlash if marketing claims and how a company behaves are not authentically aligned."

Even where a corporation's green efforts are transparently sincere, consumers will sometimes wonder whether they're misguided. The vogue for biofuels is an example. You can't open a newspaper these days without seeing an article that fingers the rise of biofuels as a factor in rising food prices, with consequent strains for consumers in developed countries and outright famine for some in the Third World. Corporate social responsibility is not immune from the iron law that the best intentions can go awry. When you learn that a brand you use is engaged in a do-gooding effort that strikes you as imprudent, it's like getting a holiday card that says a donation has been made in your name to a cause you dislike.

Amid all the consumer skepticism, people do make distinctions among companies rather than disdaining them en masse. A poll by EcoAlign, a Washington, D.C.-based marketing agency, asked people to say which of a dozen companies they think "are most committed to using or providing renewable energy." General Electric (whose green practices have been featured in its "Ecomagination" ads) came out on top, with Toyota (maker of the Prius) a runner-up. BP finished in the middle of the pack, and Wal-Mart near the bottom. In a broader question, BBMG asked consumers to say which of 20 companies they regard as "the most socially responsible." Whole Foods and Newman's Own topped the voting here, while Wal-Mart came in third -- well ahead of Target, and slightly ahead of Burt's Bees, GE and Johnson & Johnson. Toyota scored better than Honda or Ford (with the latter ranking at the bottom, in an inglorious tie with Starbucks, Ikea and Green Mountain Coffee Roasters); Ben & Jerry's scored much better than Stonyfield Farm. The obvious caveat is that, as with all such surveys, simple name recognition is apt to play a part in how companies fare.

### Diminishing returns?

Within very recent memory, corporate environmentalism was an attention-getting novelty. No longer. As BBMG's Bemporad notes, "The green marketing boom has definitely reached the mainstream," even if, for many consumers, "it's no different from any other trendy marketing messages." Does this mean green marketing will approach a point of diminishing returns as more and more companies get into the act? Cone's Lawrence thinks not, though for a reason the corporate sector wouldn't find especially flattering: Since people generally distrust corporations, and since corporations are "sub-par" at handling customer service and sustaining a dialogue with consumers, virtuous action will still have the advantage of looking exceptional. "When a company comes along that is transparent, responsive, tells the truth, listens to suggestions and responds in some way, makes social and environmental commitments -- as well as financial ones-- and tries to live up to them, I would argue that company stands out as much as ever, and people notice and respond," he says. Marketers will hope he's right. Otherwise, many companies that go green will have the disagreeable sensation of discovering that virtue is its own reward.

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