

# Doing Green Marketing Well

*The keys to successfully marketing your green efforts can be as simple as under-promising, over-delivering and being honest.*

BY MICHAEL LAWSHE AND LINDSAY KUTAC

Everybody is hopping on the green bandwagon, from public corporations and private businesses to retail outlets – even convenience stores. Being a socially responsible business is as ubiquitous now as pop culture, and there is a good reason why: Customers have educated themselves and are increasingly concerned about what they put into their bodies and how their purchases affect the environment.

Recent studies show that consumers are willing to spend more money and travel further for products and services that are deemed environmentally friendly or ethically produced. That's a statistic convenience and petroleum retailers cannot ignore.

As a result of all this information and opportunity, there are also a large number of customers experiencing "green fatigue" – those who are bombarded with and confused by the buzzwords of the green movement. Terms like "carbon footprint," "global warming," "organic/"

all natural," "low-emitting" and "sustainable" often make heads spin. Eco-conscious consumers want to purchase from socially responsible retailers, but who can they trust? Unfortunately, many retailers shoulder the burden of proving their claims to this increasingly cynical consumer.

## **The Golden "Green" Rule**

While it is a smart business decision to communicate your green message to your customers, it is important to do so carefully. When marketing yourself, one rule of thumb should always hold true: It's best to under-promise, over-perform and be 100 percent honest.

Keeping that rule of thumb in mind, a few additional guidelines can help you successfully market your green message:

**1. Ask yourself, "How green do I want to be?"** Research your existing and potential customer base and determine the upfront expenses involved

in becoming green. Then, develop a plan you are comfortable with. Your level of marketing should be consistent with your level of commitment. If an in-store recycling program is your single initiative, don't post signage claiming to be the city's most environmentally friendly convenience store.

## **2. It's okay to go green to save money.**

Did you ever stop going to a hotel because of a sign that says, "We are trying to save the environment, please reuse your towel to save water"? It's evident they are trying to reduce their operating costs by reducing laundry, and that's okay. It's a measure that saves water.

## **3. Start inside your organization.**

The first people to hear your green message should be your employees (and anyone else who is critical to your business operations). Your staff and your supply chain need to be on board with new initiatives before you can effectively market them to a green-fatigued public.



**4. Start with the small stuff.** You don't need to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars installing solar panels on your roof or installing fuel islands for alternative fuels to become a socially responsible business owner. If you want to go green, start with the small things, monitor the results and work your way up. Recycling programs, new light bulbs, basic electricity-saving measures, and modifications in office supplies are good places to start.

**5. Turn attention away from yourself.** That sounds ironic, since the single purpose of marketing is to draw attention to you, but actions speak louder than words. A good way to tell your sustainability story is through memberships or awards you received for your efforts. Post certificates for your participation in energy-saving efforts and display signage or photos demonstrating your involvement in local events, sponsorships, local/national organizations, and so on. If you are

using multimedia in your store or at the pump for promotional purposes, rotate in some fuel-saving tips and interesting statistical videos on ways consumers can make a difference. By not making it about you, subconsciously you are making it about you — and that's marketing.

**6. Assume your customers are smarter than you are,** especially the Generation Y shoppers (18- to 30-year-olds) who are quick to identify exploitation and question insincere business practices. Web sites like Greenwashing-Index.com expose charlatans for all to see. If you are portraying your business as more socially responsible than it actually is, your ploy will not last for long and the backlash will not be worth the temporary reward.

A green marketing message should begin at the design level (on a new store or a remodel) and should be strategically integrated into design elements such as interior and exterior signage,

multimedia usage (in the store and at the pump), merchandising and product offerings, store layout and various architectural elements. Your message should be clear, consistent and reflective of your genuine efforts. In your quest to be green, follow these guidelines and don't be afraid to have fun. Get creative with your message. Make it memorable, make it different and overall, be sincere.

Becoming socially responsible is a good thing and creates a source of differentiation between you and your competition. It can also save you a little money down the road. ■

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