

Green Your Marketing (Without Spending Lots of Green)

Decrease your footprint, one PR pack at a time.

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Like religion or politics, environmentalism is ultimately a personal decision. Everyone chooses his or her own way to practice or vote. Don't be an evangelist or a "green-stander." Choose a green path that's comfortable for you, your business and your budget. Every little bit helps, but before you quickly jump on the green bandwagon (or fuel-efficient vehicle, as the case may be), take a broader look at all the aspects of green marketing and start by taking some small and meaningful steps toward preserving our planet. First, take a close look at the things you do in your current marketing.

Paper, Paper Everywhere!

Paper accounts for about 25% of landfill waste. If we cut our paper use by just 10% it would prevent the emission of 1.6 million tons of greenhouse gases – the equivalent of taking 280,000 cars off the road. Despite the power of e-marketing and the Internet, an average American still consumes 700 pounds of paper annually. I'm sure marketing – postcards, newsletters, ads and other communications –contributes more than its fair share to that number. "Instead of printing out studies and reports for mass consumption, we put a list of studies in our press kits with a note at the bottom that says, 'We're going green! All studies are available for download on our website,'" says Rachel Berman of the Metropolitan Council on Jewish Poverty.

Another option is to evaluate the way you print. More printers are offering recycled paper and soy-based inks as an option. Although their prices are slightly higher than traditional printers', green printers will often work with clients to come up with creative ways to save money through other aspects of their design and packaging. "Make sure you print on post-consumer [PC] paper," says Frances Beebe, president of Manhattan-based Polyprint. "Some printers simply use scraps from their shops and call them 'recycled.' You should also ask if the paper is Forest Stewardship Council-certified." Beebe also says the contents of ink are critical to green printing. "Be sure to ask for soy- or vegetable-based ink." Graphic designers can visit GreenBiz.com for a guide to green printing. And West Coast-based printer GreenerPrinter.com not only offers a totally green way to order printed materials online, it also runs a wind-powered operation. Print-on-demand technology (printing only what you need when you need it) ensures that you are ordering only as many copies as you require for a specific purpose. You reduce the waste of dated brochures and excess inventory that gradually makes its way into that landfill referenced earlier.

The Green Event

The trade show industry is the second most wasteful in the U.S., according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Only five convention centers (of the 417 nationally) have received some level of Leadership, Energy and Environmental Design certification (the standard in green building). The industry is just beginning to review its practices; however, it is an industry committed to transforming itself. An Exhibitor Magazine study called "An Inconvenient Booth" revealed that 61% of marketers involved in exhibiting plan to take steps toward reducing waste.

What can you, as an exhibitor, do to market a little greener when you go to events or embark on a live marketing effort? "Consider a green booth," suggests Gary Survis, partner of First Trade Show. "We're starting to use materials in displays that are sustainable or recycled – right down to the flooring in the booth. Exhibitors can also use environmentally friendly and recyclable packaging materials in shipping and select carriers who use alternative energy sources to power their trucks."

Robert Rosenthal of JP Promotional Products adds that green giveaways are becoming more popular. "Even the old standard pen has gone green," says Rosenthal. One supplier has come out with a pen made from a corn derivative bio-plastic and it claims is over 90% biodegradable. Another one is made with a natural paper barrel. And, to go along with your pen, you can buy notebooks and pads made of recycled paper. "Even the ubiquitous trade show lanyard has gone green, with options made from recyclable materials. And don't forget the swag bag," adds Sharon Rowe of Ecobags. "Our sales of cloth trade show bags have gone up 300% over the past year."

More People, Less Paper

Rather than handing out paper in your guerrilla marketing efforts, consider a new technology like Pixman. Roving marketers wear portable DVD players, so your message is dramatic and paperless. “These ‘human brochures’ can even gather survey data and capture prospect information,” adds E.B. Moss, principal of Moss Appeals Green, a marketing services company.

As you go through the process of evaluating your marketing and moving in a greener direction, make sure you invite your employees, contractors and vendors to join in the effort. They might even be able to suggest other creative ways to make a difference to the earth.

Another way you can contribute to the overall well-being of the planet without overhauling your marketing approach is to get involved in causes that benefit the environment. Try planting trees to replace the ones you’ve used over the years in your marketing!

How Green Are You, Really?

Greenwashing can do more harm than good. With global warming becoming an increasingly prominent concern, many companies have been making lofty – and unsubstantiated – claims of sustainability to make their brands look better in the eyes of customers. But this strategy has backfired. Oil companies and auto manufacturers are among those that have encountered the most skepticism from consumers and the media about their newfound ecological awareness. Efforts to “be greener” are often perceived as a marketing ploy rather than a manifestation of a sincere effort to be socially responsible. Sharon Rowe, founder and CEO of Westchester-based Ecobags, has been operating in the “green space” since 1989. She asserts, “Going green for a trip to the bank only – without fully addressing the social and environmental impact of your actions – is greenwashing. Look to companies like Patagonia and Whole Foods, which are making money while staying true to their environmental values.”

The term “greenwashing” was coined in the early 1990s. A Canada-based environmental marketing firm, Terrachoice, took it one step further last year by publishing the Six Sins of Greenwashing (terrachoice.com/files/6_sins.pdf). The sins are summarized below.

Do not:

- Suggest your product is green based on a single environmental attribute. For example, a paper towel company promotes its product as being made from forest-safe material, but does not address its manufacturing impacts such as emissions and water pollution.
- Poorly define eco-friendly qualities. If you include the recycled symbol on a product’s packaging, specify if the product is made from recycled materials or merely the package.
- Claim to be green without publishing data or proof on your company website or the package itself.
- Distract consumers from the environmental impact of the industry as a whole (green herbicides may be all natural, but that does not make them earth-friendly).
- Feature unimportant and unhelpful claims that could confuse consumers seeking environmentally preferable products.
- Make blatantly false statements.

Green marketing is still in its infancy. At this point, it seems to still be a trend that many businesses are following as a way to capitalize on the growing demand for products that reduce harm to the planet. In the interim, get to know your facts, review new options and think twice before touting yourself as environmentally friendly. (Oh yes, and be sure to file, share or recycle this magazine when you finish reading it!)

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