

Four Ways to Create Effective "Green" Messages

By Isabelle Albanese

The 2008 Green Gap Survey, conducted by Cone LLC and The Boston College Center for Corporate Citizenship, found that nearly 4 in 10 Americans will choose a product they believe is "environmentally friendly." Yet this survey also found that only 1 in 5 consumers actually understand what environmental messages are trying to convey. In other words, there's an information gap between the messenger and the consumer.

If you want to reach the coveted "green boomer" market and young consumers looking to make a difference with their dollars, here are four tips.

1. Make it clear. Does the audience readily "get" the message or main idea? A phrase such as "reduces your carbon footprint" is vague. On the other hand, "Saves you \$10 a month off your electric bill" is specific. Ask yourself, what does the message instantly communicate (e.g., more money in my pocket or a sense that I'm part of the solution, not the problem)? Can your audience readily play the message back?

An example of a company with a crystal-clear green message is ReCellular, which recycles or reuses 75,000 phones per week. From their clever company name with its embedded pun, to their company slogan, "Hello again," ReCellular delivers a no-frills, unencumbered message directly to consumers.

2. Make it meaningful. An effective message connects with the audience. It has meaning and significance for them, and usually triggers an irrational or emotional response--frustration, excitement, anger, passion, joy, happiness, sadness, etc. When connection is there, it will spark new behaviors and actions. So for example, "Made from 50% recycled paper products" falls flat. To make the buyer instantly feel better, try this: "If you use this product for a year, you will save three mature trees."

A great example of an eco-friendly company that has achieved the ever-elusive "connection" factor is yogurt producer Stonyfield Farms. This company, now the fourth largest producer of yogurt worldwide, nevertheless evokes a down-homey, warm, happy feeling in buyers. Beginning with their earliest ad campaigns, which pledged to only use local milk from New Hampshire dairies, to their evolving image "for a healthy planet"--which appears right on their label--this company understands how to win people's hearts.

3. Make it believable. A giant chemical company's boast that it's cleaning up the water and air might not go over too well with today's skeptical consumers. The audience needs to believe who is saying it (the brand or messenger's voice), what is being said, and how it's being said. What if, instead, the chemical company said, "We're trying to do better--and we have the means, the know-how, and a newfound desire to turn our environmental practices around." A statement like this is more credible--especially if they cite specific examples that are affecting the lives of ordinary, real people.

A company that has managed to overcome its big bully image and gain credibility in the process is GE, which even coined a new word, "ecomagination." GE has spared no expense convincing consumers it's serious about environmental change, through copious ads and sponsorships. The result? Consumers now believe GE is using its status as a mega-corporation to change the world.

4. Make it catchy. In communications, contagiousness is a good thing. You want the audience to "catch the message" and spread it around--like a TV ad slogan you repeat in conversations with friends. To be contagious, a message has to be energetic, new, different, and memorable. It should also evoke a vivid emotional response, have "talk" potential, motivate the target to do something, and elicit a demonstrable reaction.

Zipcar did this by encouraging urban dwellers to ditch their old car. From their zippy name that connotes speed, ease, and fun, to their brightly colored, new model, fuel-efficient, low-emission cars, this company has used great marketing to convert thousands of urban dwellers to car sharing. When people see Zipcars on the road, they ask, "What's a Zipcar?" And then they tell their friends about it. That's catchy messaging.

To conclude, efficient green messaging should accomplish the 4Cs: Comprehension, Connection, Credibility, and Contagiousness. If you can do this truthfully and well, you will gain a foothold in the lucrative eco-consumer market.

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