When marketing puts on a ‘green’ jacket

On the one hand, consumers are getting more ‘picky’ about choosing products that have a gentler carbon footprint on the environment. On the other, businesses, marketers, advertisers and retailers are scrambling to add a deeper shade of green to their credentials.

The result? Countless companies are jumping on the ‘Green Marketing’ (also known as Environmental or Ecological Marketing) bandwagon, while only some really earn a rightful place here. Unfortunately, most consumers can’t tell the difference.

Which raises the question: what about Green Marketing makes it the real McCoy?

What it is
The American Marketing Association describes it as ‘the marketing of products that are presumed to be environmentally safe’. It could promote a range of factors, such as the modification of products, changes to production processes, improvements to packaging, or adding a green spin to advertising campaigns.

But in essence, a company’s Green Marketing objectives should be about honouring the three pillars of sustainability: people (caring about your employees, knowing your customer, as well as supporting the needs and aspirations of the communities in which you operate); planet (measurable initiatives to reduce your impact on the environment), and prosperity (contributing to short- and long-term economic growth).

It’s also about integrity. At The Journal’s breakfast debate on Green Marketing held in Sandton in May this year, Deon Robbertze (Creative Director: Ogilvy earth South Africa) pointed out that Green Marketing is about, “fixing what’s wrong, not shouting about what’s right.” He said transparency needs to become part of the ‘DNA’ of a company’s brand/s. It’s first about doing things right and understanding it internally, and then talking about and promoting it to the outside world.

There is no such thing as ‘environmentally friendly’. As a business, you have an impact on the environment. The question is: how are you minimising that effect? Responsible Green Marketing starts by educating people, helping them understand what it really means so they can make informed choices.

What it does
In his book, The Green Marketing Manifesto (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2007), John Grant shares this sentiment. He describes Green Marketing as the transition from marketing that ‘looks good, to marketing that does good’.

It is a form of marketing that has the power to convince consumers to change their behaviour beyond recognition. According to Grant, behaviour can be changed, not only through education, but also by making ‘green’ manufacturing practices, products and a ‘green’ lifestyle the norm (not a niche), and making damaging environmental practices unattractive.

Grant’s Green Marketing philosophy is described in a review on www.marketingmix.co.za, as being:

• Intuitive – making better alternatives accessible and easy to understand
• Integrated – combining commerce, technology, social effects and ecology
• Innovative – creating new products and lifestyles
• Inviting – making it a positive choice
• Informative – as a lack of knowledge distorts people’s behaviour

While factory toxins, exhaust gasses and city carbons are turning our world into foggy shades of grey, ‘green’ is fast becoming the most fashionable colour on the planet. But don’t be fooled.

BY BERNHARD RIEGLER, MARKETING DIRECTOR, SAPPi

20 [ the journal ]
Getting it right
Companies that are draping their marketing efforts in layers of ‘green’, but not yet living the true principles of sustainability need to get their act together, and fast.

In the 2009 Global Green Brands Survey, 76% of all US consumers surveyed said they will spend the same or more on green products in the next year. And this trend will only grow, globally. Ecopreneur.co.za predicts that the extreme rate at which people will be moving to cities over the next three years and beyond will lead to more sophisticated and demanding consumers around the world – and ‘green living’ is already regarded as a sophisticated choice.

With time, it will also become easy for them to distinguish between Green Marketing and hogwash. Marketing coach at Entrepreneur.com, Kim T Gordon, says that more consumers would want to support companies and products that:

- Prove their claims - they will look past vague statements and rather seek out specific information on certifications, ingredients, consumer reports, testimonials, etc. Information on the packaging will be their first clue.
- Are well priced – because, as a responsible company committed to the true pillars of sustainability, consumers will expect the manufacturer to be concerned about the environment, and not just his own pocket. Kim urges companies to look at their competitors and structure the pricing of their green products to challenge them (which is also a great way of gaining competitive advantage).
- Offer personal benefits - Green Marketing makes things personal. The message shouldn’t only be about saving the planet. For many consumers the bottom line is: what is this product doing for me? Eg: ‘It’s organically grown, so fewer toxins will find their way into my body and the bodies of my family’.

To achieve the above, green marketing expert Jacquelyn Ottman suggests that companies should get their product right (from the R&D stage right through to managing its life cycle impacts), know their customer, focus on the product’s primary benefits and be credible.

Green Marketing in practice
Global pulp and paper producer, Sappi, is painstakingly focusing on mitigating its impact on the environment, being transparent about its operations, being specific and accurate about any ‘green’ claims they make, and understanding and meeting customer and end-user requirements.

For example, as far back as 2000 Sappi started a system to measure, monitor and mitigate its greenhouse gas emissions – and undertook to disclose the progress. As a result, Sappi was recognised internationally last year with a fifth place in the South African Disclosure Project Leadership Index, and was also included in the top performers’ list of 16 companies in terms of its actual performance on climate mitigation and adaptation actions.

Sappi’s ‘I choose paper’ campaign is also an example of Green Marketing that educates, informs, gives specific information and takes customer and consumer needs into account (see www.ichoosepaper.com). Its campaign is geared towards introducing businesses and consumers to a whole new world of innovative, custom-designed and environmentally sound paper packaging solutions.

As Sappi Kraft Managing Director, Albert Lubbe, explains, “Sustainability features on the agenda of most organisations and retailers, but implementation often lags behind intent. As a result, the lack of sustainable packaging choices, in particular, is not meeting changing consumer demand or business targets. That’s why Sappi is partnering with role players right from the R&D stage to custom develop food-grade and other paper packaging solutions that have the properties most needed in this sector.”

The bottom line is that Green Marketing can only be successful if a company gets the basics right: laying a foundation of sustainable, environmentally sound and customer-oriented practices.

Only then will they win the hearts of the consumer, and make their competition green with envy.