

# Green Pragmatism

Despite its Hollywood trendiness, the average person doesn't go out and buy a Prius just to feel good about reducing his or her carbon footprint. Most people buy cars that meet their motoring needs and end up choosing a Prius because its environmental proof-points align with their personal requirements.

It's the classic emotional/rational balance: a high-mileage vehicle from a respected, reliable manufacturer means lower consumption of greenhouse-gas producing (not to mention high price-volatility) fossil fuels.

**Eco-savvy consumers should be at the center of your brand strategy.**

The Prius appeal is a perfect example of *green pragmatism*, because the vehicle's environmental benefits are used for more than just a "feel good" green spin — they are rational product proof-points. As a result, the consumers' emotional motivation is grounded in the fulfillment of their own, personal "value equation."

The Prius is also an excellent illustration of how green pragmatism enables customer satisfaction based on a product's performance versus its brand promise, while also enabling the consumer to enjoy the intangible benefits of feeling smart and environmentally responsible.

Green pragmatism furthermore adds a degree of proof that is critical to building credibility with the greenest consumers, which tend to fall into the LOHAS (Lifestyles of Health & Sustainability) category. LOHAS consumers are well-informed opinion leaders who make shopping choices based on their personal values.

If your environmental claims lack substance, this is the audience who will know it, and call you out to the mainstream. So, whether or not your product aims at the mainstream or the greenest consumers, you should always have the most eco-savvy at the center of your bulls-eye, and ensure you develop appropriate communications strategies to engage them.

Ultimately, brands will succeed or fail based upon their performance, and green products, whether genuinely or simply painted so, are no different. If eco-friendly laundry detergent leaves your kids' clothes dingy, no amount of environmental-feel-good messaging will persuade you to buy it again. And that all-natural cleaning spray that leaves a nasty film on your counter is probably going to lead you back to "chemical land" the next time around.

The importance of basic product performance can't be underestimated when it comes to green goods. In fact, they may even be under more of a performance microscope than their muddier counterparts. Think about the lighting industry's first pass as Compact Fluorescent Light bulbs (CFLs). They were large, awkward, humming beasts that ended up in the trash cans as fast as you could, well, change a light bulb.

It was only when product performance (better light quality, noise elimination, proper sizing, variety and versatility) caught up that the category took off, growing steadily as a segment of the market and becoming an icon of sorts for energy efficiency.

Consider, as well, the results of the June 2008 *ImagePower Green Brands Survey*: Americans listed Whole Foods, Burt's Bees, Trader Joe's, Tom's of Maine and Toyota as the top 5 environmentally friendly brands.

It's no coincidence these brands' green "Unique Selling Propositions" (USPs) are easy to understand — from all-natural ingredients to less reliance on fossil fuels, each of these companies communicates its environmental friendliness in a clear and simple fashion.

## LET'S GET REAL

It seems everywhere you look today, people are talking about "green marketing," and there is no shortage of experts sharing their ideas on how to enhance a brand with a green halo, or the sins to avoid in doing so.

## The Energy Star Promise

The US EPA's *Energy Star* program is an excellent example of successful green messaging. Over the past 10 years, this voluntary government program has built brand awareness from 40 to 74 percent, and become one of the most trusted brands in America. Underpinning its success is a clear and understandable approach to environmental messaging.

From the program's inception, *Energy Star's* brand promise has been clear—superior energy efficiency with equal or better product performance. Energy efficiency delivers environmental benefits through the reduction of greenhouse gasses and the risks of global warming.

While the brand's mission is to reduce carbon emissions, it has always spoken to consumers in clear and tangible terms that were immediately relevant: save energy, save money and protect the environment.

This mix of emotional/rational, aspirational and tangible has helped this government-labeling program serve as an anchor for many of America's top-rated retailers and manufacturers and influence the purchase of millions of products.

The EPA's most recent PSA campaign further demonstrates the right approach. It features everyday American consumers and companies working to fight global warming with *Energy Star*, and offers distinct proof-points in terms of the specific actions taken, and the resulting savings.

For example, a Vermont homeowner installed *Energy Star* qualified lighting, a programmable thermostat, furnace, and new insulation.

As a result, she is saving \$1,150 on her energy bills, 11,000 kilowatts of electricity, and preventing 12,000 pounds of CO<sub>2</sub> from entering the atmosphere: real people, real solutions, real proof-points.

This approach enables *Energy Star* to build a strong emotional/rational balance; offering the empowering, aspirational message that average, everyday Americans can help in the fight against global warming, and paying out that with proof points in clearly articulated metrics.

As a result, the brand continues to grow in awareness, influence and relevance.

We've even coined terms like "greenwashing" to denote misleading green marketing and its by-product, the "green fatigue" which plagues our consumer victims with confusion and frustration. It's no wonder that *Mediapost* called "green" today's "trendiest marketing buzz word."

But let's get real: Consumers don't buy green products simply to play "eco-hero." In fact, true environmentalists would assert the most sustainable behavior is to reduce one's consumption in the first place, and fulfill only your true needs with eco-friendly options.

Admittedly, encouraging people to buy less stuff is a risky proposition for marketers. But there is something to be learned from taking a more pragmatic approach to green marketing.

Consumers today are inundated with advertising messages that aim to create a green halo without any level of specificity. This is a major contributor to "green backlash"—more green noise with less clarity causing more consumer confusion, frustration and cynicism. Myriad research studies tell us that consumers want to make choices to protect the environment, they just don't know how. Serving up more noise and less real direction only exacerbates the problem.

The dreaded "green fatigue" is nothing more than consumers' sheer exhaustion from trying to figure out what "green" means, which products really deliver on the promise, and by extension, how to make truly eco-friendly purchases.

Making it easy for your target audience to understand your green USP is critical to making it work to your advantage, and standing out as a truly environmentally preferable green brand.

Think about it: The best brands represent a combination of tangible benefits and intangible associations. It's no different in the environmental space. Let's shift the dialog from how to best color products green to how a product's sustainability enhances a platform made solid by tangible benefits and product performance. ■



**CINDY JOLICOEUR**, a vice-president at **Marketing Drive**, leads the agency's Energy & Environment practice, providing branding, B2C and B2B marketing solutions to a range of clients. Cindy can be reached at [cindy.jolicoeur@marketingdrive.com](mailto:cindy.jolicoeur@marketingdrive.com)