

# Green consumers: sustainability's science fiction

Had H.G. Wells been a demographer, he might have originated the green consumer.

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Green consumers and little green Martians have traits in common, other than their respective figurative and literal color descriptions. The two inspire science fiction, writing that combines imagination and speculation based on science. Sci-fi is harmless as entertainment, harmful as competitive strategy for consumer packaged goods.

The science alluded to vis-à-vis green consumers concerns sustainability: the measuring, projecting, and protecting of the planet's health. Sustainability is real—non-fiction, continuing the analogy; however, it doesn't necessarily follow that it has created a segment of consumers whose purchases are primarily driven by environmental-conscientiousness. Yet, the notion of the green consumer endures, like a serial character, described in chromatic shades (i.e. from dark to pastel). Martians can be segmented similarly, let's say, in reflection of the various ethnicities among that population. The point: segmentation is not proof of the existence of that which is being segmented.

Proof offered in the form of marketing research doesn't resolve the argument. Respondents have a motive for wanting to be regarded as environmentally-conscientious and will exaggerate what they are willing to sacrifice. And, if there are consumers willing to sacrifice mightily, they constitute such a minority, that they might as well be nonexistent, given the volumes necessary for most consumer packaged goods.

It's ill-advised for any CPGC to lose sight of the most fundamental characteristic of consumers: self-interest. Consumers buy first and foremost to satisfy needs. Those needs translate into product demands, that give rise to product features, which (companies hope) consumers perceive as benefits that satisfy their needs. Strategy should not run, well, alien to that sequence.

Companies, rather than expecting sustainability to supplant the consumers' needs-satisfaction motive, should incorporate sustainability as a product feature that provides a consumer benefit without sacrifice of quality, performance, convenience, and value (relative price). The strategic prowess of sustainability is as a tie-breaker. The product must, at least, be equal to the competition in the above-mentioned parameters, so that sustainability becomes the swaying variable.

From the same research that reveals that consumers exaggerate their environmental-conscientiousness, it can be inferred that consumers would welcome the ability to cast themselves positively but truthfully. Companies can make it painless for consumers to do that, through packaged products that provide sustainability as a bonus, not as the expected reason for the purchase. When that's done, the greenness of the consumers' strips becomes a nonissue.

### **What about green packaging?**

Is it, also, the stuff of sci-fi, along the lines of, The Martian spaceship housed only a modest storage bay, thanks to advanced packaging technology that took source-reduction to heights unknown on Earth? No.

Green packaging is real and a logical spawn of the sustainability era. It's a natural source of a packaged product's green profile, regardless of whether the product component adds to that profile. A company, depending on its core consumer segment, might have reason not to alter the product component, electing instead to reserve formula (or related) changes for line-extensions or a new brand. Teaming that product with green packaging can make for an even more formidable offering.

Green packaging, however, is not as straightforward a concept as it's often made out to be. The term, green, should not be thought of as an absolute, as a destination reached, as is sometimes implied by suppliers and users, alike. Worse of all would be to think in the superlative: for, no type of packaging can justifiably be said to be the greenest. The very idea contradicts sustainability, which can be likened to certain algebraic concepts that regardless of the number of reiterations only approach zero but never reach it. When it comes to sustainability and all of its outgrowths (such as packaging), a serving philosophy is: When all is said and done, there remains more to say and do.

That philosophy is captured by thinking in terms of the comparative, that is to say, a greener package. At any given time, a company should be able to make the case that its present packaging is greener than its predecessors, and that the company is on the path toward packaging that is greener yet. That way, the company never rests on its sustainability laurels.

An important determination is by what means a company's green packaging is to be brought to the attention of the not-to-be-called-green consumer. There's the direct method, using the packaging, itself, as the medium, typically employing an eco-coined name. That's not always practical, however. An example is the elimination of a folding carton. It would seem impractical to announce on the bottle the obvious fact that there's no carton. In lieu, does the company rely on the consumer to notice the elimination and to regard the solo bottle as the more sustainable option? It begs a more fundamental question: does it matter? Another way to pose it is: must green packaging always be expected to result in incremental sales? Not necessarily.

## **The green supply chain**

Since the green package is not sci-fi, neither is the green supply chain, since the resources utilized in the handling, transportation, and storage functions are so affected by packaging. Hence, packaging that is green and functional can generate cost savings and efficiencies that can make the CPGC less dependent on incremental sales. Assume a re-dimensioned primary package that's smaller and generates savings and efficiencies throughout the supply chain. Further assume that the revised packaging makes better utilization of shelf-space, endearing it to the retailer, and resulting in additional aisle-facings. Under that scenario, the CPGC is ahead, even if sales volume goes unchanged.

An additional benefit of not having to justify green packaging on sales volume (which reflects consumer reaction) is that the company is under less pressure to make the types of promotional claims that can expose it to charges of greenwashing.

## **Closing knowledge gaps about consumers**

A company liberated from believing in green consumers nonetheless must decide how to regard consumers in the sustainability era. Much is yet to be learned, and the limitations of some forms of research should be acknowledged and new, broadened thinking employed.

Toward that end, companies need a set of principles to guide their efforts. One should be that sustainability involves mankind, as a species, and therefore, segmentation, which relies upon groupings based on perceived differences, should go beyond traditional applications. If not, results will skew toward niches, at the expense of mass-marketing opportunities. It cramps packaging graphics, for one thing, reflected in the multitude that incorporates the color green or an earth-tone. Blending in with surrounding products is the opposite of the shelf-impact that packaging is supposed to bestow. Sustainability needs to be presented in a more mainstream fashion.

On another note, concepts need to be expanded. A case in point is competition, conventionally regarded as what's provided by companies making like products or substitutable ones. But, energy-saving replacement windows can be competition to a seemingly unrelated product, if the consumer regards the windows (or hybrid, florescent bulbs, sorting the trash, etc.) as license to be less environmentally-conscientious in other aspects of her life. Is there a consumer version of energy credits? And, if so, to what extent is it practiced? CPGC's need those answers and more to maximize the strategic potential of sustainability. Packaging professionals have an inherent interest because they must reflect those answers in structural and graphic forms.

But, to those companies still determined to base the development of product and package on a believed green consumer, here's some advice: an appropriate test market might be Roswell.

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