

Two Case Studies in Marketing to Environmentally Conscious Consumers: Marcal Vs. Ben & Jerry's

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With the green market growing at 29 percent per year, (Rubin, A., Personal communication April 4, 2012), many businesses are going after the high-disposable-income, highly loyal Green consumer. Yet other businesses may have taken steps to green their businesses, but fail to realize how much marketing “juice” that commitment can provide, how much loyalty and trust those steps can engender.

Interestingly, research by the Shelton Group, J. Ottman Consulting, and others show that many green businesses can benefit by turning their green features into superior benefits that can sway the non-green, or the non-committed green.

But to reach the deep greens is important as well. Traditional benefit-only or image-only messaging doesn't always work for this audience. They want to see both, a benefit to themselves, and a benefit to the world. If you can make it clear that you offer something that helps the consumer and helps the planet, those customers will flock to you. And if you can make them feel actively and genuinely involved, so much the better.

This article will explore two companies' efforts in this sector. The first was an early convert to green production and manufacturing, but very slow to convert this into a marketing strategy. The other has a 30+ year history of targeting the deep green customer as one of its primary market niches.

But before we look at the two specific companies, let's take a moment to get grounded in the types of message points that offer both the personal and planetary benefit that the deep green consumer seeks. Here are a few examples:

- “Because our facility is 80% solar (wind, hydro) powered, we keep coal pollution out of your lungs and lower the whole area's carbon footprint”
- “Working to achieve zero waste within two years—lengthening the lifespan of your landfill lasts longer and creating cool and useful life-enhancing products from the materials we used to throw away”

- “Using only recycled raw materials since 1970—not only to save you money, but because it's important to use the resources already extracted instead of mining new ore and scarring the earth”
- “Our non-toxic organic vegetable ink is fully biodegradable—because we know you don't want heavy metals and chemicals in your compost”

A marketing piece is also stronger if you can also compete on price, quality, and/or value:

- “This reusable furnace filter is not only greener than disposable filters, it shaves your oil bill by 8 percent”
- “Cut your water use by half...for pennies”
- “Say good-bye to the produce-spoils-too-fast problem—enjoy your garden harvest all year long with this simple food dehydrator”
- “Because we use renewable, comfortable bamboo flooring, you'll stay warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer”

But even if the products don't compete on dollar value, these Deep Green Cultural Creatives will often spend more than they have to, if they feel the extra dollars are going for something good, and if they feel a personal tug. Nongreen shoppers, however, will not be moved by appealing to a higher good.

However, the Deep Green group's lie detectors can be very sharp; in many cases, they've done the homework, and if they think a company is greenwashing, those marketing messages will be received with open hostility. Marketing a very un-green technology such as nuclear power using Green marketing messages will only create a backlash and get that company attack both on social media and in the mainstream press. Companies should only make claims they can verify are really green, and really accurate.

With that background, it's time to look at a couple of real-life examples.

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1. Case Study I: Marcal

Marcal is a household paper products company based in New Jersey and marketing within the Northeast United States. Founded as a family business in 1939, this company switched to recycled raw materials all the way back in 1950. However, it was only in the mid-2000s that the company began to call attention to this enormous marketing advantage—using the slogan, “Paper From Paper, Not From Trees.”

In the early years of its journey with recycled paper, it is perhaps understandable that Marcal would refrain from calling attention to its initiative. After all, the culture of the 1950s and early 1960s in the United States (as expressed in television and magazine advertising) emphasized extreme sanitation, suburban culture, the housewife glowingly welcoming her husband home into a sparkling kitchen and gleaming house. The company may have been justifiably nervous about letting it be known that its toilet paper was made from other people's discarded junk mail. The lack of early disclosure may have started as a legitimate fear that people wouldn't buy household paper made of other people's castoffs, even if it was just their sterilized junk mail. In the conformist, status-conscious 1950s, recycled paper stock could well have been seen as a liability.

Yet, the first Earth Day was all the way back in 1970. Certainly by the mid-1970s, a strong—if small—constituency for green living was developing. It had its own infrastructure, with natural food stores and restaurants, bicycle co-ops, publishers specializing in books and magazines on related topics, and a resurgent back-to-the-land movement showing up in rural communities a few hours distance from large cities.

When I ask my audiences for my “Making Green Sexy” talks, what year they think Marcal switched to recycled paper, most of the answers tend to fall between 1985 and 2005. Occasionally someone will guess a year in the 1970s, especially if I call the company a pioneer in using recycled stock.

Almost no one guesses the correct answer, or even the correct decade, without prompting. Because, for too long, Marcal kept its best marketing point hidden. Even though the company has been 100% recycled for more than 60 years, it has only been in the past decade that it started incorporating this vital message into its packaging—and only since 2009 that environmental branding has become the central focus of its message to consumers.

Marcal did not do any marketing about its long history of recycled products until the early 2000s—more than 30 years after that first Earth Day. Apparently, the company either did not perceive this characteristic as a marketing differentiation point, or did not understand how to harness the marketing advantage without alienating nongreen purchasers (including

a large B2B customer base using Marcal in factories, public restrooms, etc.

Finally, following a bankruptcy in 2006, Marcal launched the Small Steps line of paper towels, napkins, and toilet paper in a 2009 rebranding focused specifically on the environmental attributes.

By this late date, consumer support far outweighed any residual consumer resistance. This line was introduced in April, 2009. By December, just eight months later, this regional brand was the top selling recycled household paper product line in the United States—surpassing at least one national brand that had been on the market for more than two decades.

The 2009 packaging has a large tree logo right in the center, with the words “Help Us Save 1 Million Trees.” Immediately above, it says “A Small, Easy Step to a Greener Earth™”; and underneath the tree logo, in red, “100% Premium Recycled Paper.” Underneath is a list of both environmental and personal features, such as chlorine-free whitening and hypoallergenic properties. The slogan, “Saving Trees Since 1950” is also present, but small and hard to see.

A year later, in the spring of 2010, the message is even clearer. That incarnation of the package not only gives more prominence to “Saving Trees Since 1950,” but devotes the entire right-hand third of the front panel to environmental messages. The top of that section is a huge recycling logo wrapped around the tree picture. Directly underneath that, in the same typeface and nearly as large as the brand name, “100% Premium Recycled.”

Under that, the package proclaims, “You Can Help Save 1 Million Trees” (notice the personal involvement of the customer there). Below that, a list of six “environmental facts,” and finally, this question: “What's in your paper products?”

It is worth speculating how much more toilet paper, napkins, tissues and paper towels the company would have sold if it had started bragging earlier. As the public first became aware of environmental concerns in the early 1970s, many consumers would likely have been thrilled to find a cost-competitive brand that was also very green.

2. Case Study II: Ben & Jerry's

Ben & Jerry's is a global brand with consistent market penetration across the United States and some availability in at least five other countries ([Ben-Jerry's Homemade Inc.](#))

Its primary product is superpremium ice cream, and it was only the second brand in the category to achieve national distribution throughout the US. The company was founded in 1978 in a converted gas station by Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield—neither of whom had experience either running a business or making ice cream.

Although there are hundreds of superpremium ice cream makers in the United States, Ben & Jerry's is one of just two companies in the superpremium ice cream market with more than a few points of market share; Ben & Jerry's and Haagen-Dazs both typically have 40–45 percent of the market, leaving the remaining few percentage points to be divided among the many smaller brands (Levinson & Horowitz, 2010).

How did this upstart company that broke all the rules become so successful? Many leading voices, including this author, believe that the success of companies like Ben & Jerry's with social and environmental activism entrenched in their corporate DNA is due in significant part to that social and environmental commitment. It provides a significant competitive advantage and differentiates those companies from the rest of the pack. (Kane, 2010).

Unlike Marcal, Ben & Jerry's has been trumpeting its social and environmental responsibility from its very earliest days, and is widely considered a pioneer in the business social responsibility movement ([Ben-Jerry's Homemade Inc.](#)). Throughout its history, the company has frequently exhibited at and/or sponsored alternative energy festivals, partnered with charities to provide jobs to workers on the margin, and consistently presented its vision of a better world. When the company went public, the first chance to buy shares went to local residents. In 1985, Cohen and Greenfield set up a foundation to fund community projects with 7.5 percent of pretax profits. In 1991 and 1992, the company sponsored a nationwide tour of street performers who traveled in support of solar energy using a partially solar-powered bus ([benjerry.com/company](#)).

Social and environmental commitment remains a hallmark of the company even after its takeover by the European giant Unilever. In fact, under Unilever's ownership, it was certified as a B Corporation (Benefit Corporation in 2012—the first subsidiary of a publicly traded company to achieve this. ([nonprofitquarterly.org](#)) B Corporations are not legally bound to put profit ahead of all other values; on the contrary, they are bound to use its structure to achieve good in the world). In 2010, the company pledged to source exclusively with fairly traded ingredients, and is on track to achieve that ambitious goal, affecting hundreds of ingredients for its 58 flavors, by the end of 2013. Ben & Jerry's even credits Unilever's massive reach for making that transition possible. ([justmeans.com](#))

Without using the term Triple Bottom Line, B & J's mission statement emphasizes the concept of equal weight to economic performance, social justice, and both product and environmental quality. Under the social heading is a commitment to “initiating innovative ways to improve the quality of life locally, nationally, and internationally.”

Rather than use a specifically environmental heading, Ben & Jerry's environmental goals are included in the Product portion

of the mission: “with a continued commitment to incorporating wholesome, natural ingredients and promoting business practices that respect the Earth and the Environment.”

From my point of view as a marketing consultant, the environmental language is excessively vague. In many companies, this could look like greenwashing—but in B & J's case, the public is well aware of its environmental commitments. For decades, the company has been sponsoring alternative energy fairs, buying from local and/or sustainable farmers, and in general taking quite seriously the sustainability aspects of its mission.

Interestingly, the company is considerably more explicit in a fourth section of its Mission page: “Leading with Progressive Values in our Business.” Two of the five bullets, plus the introductory paragraph, focus specifically on environmental concerns: sustainable, family-farm-based agriculture and minimizing waste. The other bullets focus on economic equality and peace.

Although few American corporations would be willing to sign off on this statement, the company is even willing to publicly articulate as its first bullet that the U. S. economic system has its perils:

Capitalism and the wealth it produces do not create opportunity for everyone equally. We recognize that the gap between the rich and the poor is wider than at any time since the 1920's. We strive to create economic opportunities for those who have been denied them and to advance new models of economic justice that are sustainable and replicable.

It's not just about the mission statement, either. Ben & Jerry's social and environmental responsibility messaging is consistent across all touchpoints. Go to the website, look at a package, view an ad—the message is pretty similar.

Examples: A package of Chocolate Macadamia describes it as a “flavor with a mission,” and prominently displays the Fair Trade logo—something very important to anyone who has studied the use by many chocolate producers of child slaves. The Activism web pages feature five different environmental initiatives, including Earth-friendly freezers—and six initiatives under the Social section of the mission. A brochure describes the social mission of setting up scoop shops that employ the disadvantaged.

So...when was the last time you looked at the environmental messages you're creating, and how they could not only promote the change you want to see in the world, but also draw in customers who love you because of your values?

Marketing consultant and copywriter Shel Horowitz shows you how to “reach Green, socially conscious consumers with ethical marketing that has THEM calling YOU.” An international speaker and writer of the monthly syndicated column, Green and Profitable, he covers Green messaging in far more detail in

his eighth book, *Guerrilla Marketing Goes Green: Winning Strategies to Improve Your Profits and Your Planet (with Jay Conrad Levinson; John Wiley & Sons, 2010)*. His website is <http://greenandprofitable.com>.

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