Sustainable branding: How to shop for environmentally-responsible brands

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A total of 81% of people expect brands that they buy from to align with their values. Now, more than ever, companies are expected to be involved in driving social change (IBM, 2020). In particular, they are expected to be involved in fixing environmental issues, such as climate change and plastic pollution, which have become a priority for many people. As a result, **sustainable branding** has become a strong platform for businesses to engage with their consumers.

What is sustainable branding?

A sustainable brand (or a **green brand**) is a brand whose essence is based around environmental values. In a 2020 IBM study, 57% of surveyed consumers were willing to change their buying habits to reduce any negative environmental impacts. Sustainable brands fill the gap in the market for sustainable products and services, while using their environmental credentials as a selling point (Insch, 2011).

Green marketing is a marketing strategy that enables brands to integrate sustainability into their brand's essence. This can be split into two main approaches: Functional benefits and emotional benefits (Futerra, 2015; Hartmann et al., 2005).

On the one hand, functional benefits involve appealing to the consumers' rational minds. Green brands create this by selling products and services with environmentally-aware features. An example of a brand that marketed its functional benefits extremely well is *Intermarché*, which is a French supermarket chain that ran a program that would sell imperfect fruits and vegetables at a 30% discounted price. This led to all their imperfect fruits and vegetables being sold out, while increasing store traffic by 24% (Futerra, 2015)!

On the other hand, emotional benefits are benefits that appeal to consumers' emotions. Green brands do this by having a clear purpose that allows customers to feel like they are contributing to environmental causes when engaging with the brand. An example of a brand that has done this well is Tesla, whose large following is based on the excitement of the potential of the electric car movement.

Using both approaches is an important aspect of green marketing.

Unfortunately, **greenwashing** is also common, which occurs when businesses convince consumers that they are doing more than they say to be sustainable (Acaroglu, 2019). Often, this happens when businesses invest in advertising themselves as eco-friendly, but without sufficiently developing eco-friendly services or products.

How to spot greenwashing from green marketing

Green marketing

Many companies that are committed to sustainability have common strategies in their marketing. For example, some markers of great green marketing include:

1. **Transparent operations**. This means that the information is transparent

regarding where the products come from. Ideally, the green brands should be open with regards to where the ingredients are sourced, the production process, and the transport process. Having all aspects of transparency makes it easy to check the brand's claims and to know that a business isn't greenwashing.
2. **Corporate sustainability processes**. This includes recycling programs, funding charitable causes, and demonstrating social responsibility in other ways.
3. **Having a cohesive and clear purpose**. A company should be consistent and clear when communicating what environmental issues they are working towards and how. This includes the information on their website, in their store image, products, and on social media.
4. **Engagement with community projects and environmental non-profit groups.** Sustainable branding isn't only about selling sustainable products. Businesses can show their support for environmental causes through assisting other environmentally-conscious groups with their efforts.
5. **Details how the business helps save resources and positively impacts the environment**. Having statistical data and facts that show that the company is serious about ensuring that its products and services are green.

Some companies with fantastic green marketing campaigns include: Lush, Patagonia, The Body Shop, and Beyond Meat (Sownie, 2019).

Greenwashing

The Greenwash Guide by the Futerra Consulting Group also provides excellent advice on the ten signs to look out for when spotting a greenwashing company. They are:

1. **Fluffy language**: Words or terms with no clear meaning, e.g. "eco-friendly".
2. **Green product vs. dirty company**: Such as the efficient light bulbs that are made in a factory that pollutes rivers.
3. **Suggestive pictures**: Green images that indicate an unjustified green impact (e.g. flowers blooming from exhaust pipes).
4. **Irrelevant claims**: Emphasizing one tiny green attribute when

everything else is not green.
5. **Best in class**: Declaring you are slightly greener than other companies, even if they are quite terrible.
6. **Just not credible**: “Eco-friendly” cigarettes, anyone? “Greening” a dangerous product doesn’t make it safe.
7. **Jargon**: Information that only a scientist could check or understand.
8. **Imaginary friends**: A “label” that looks like a third-party endorsement. Except it’s made up.
9. **No proof**: It could be right, but where’s the evidence?
10. **Outright lying**: Totally fabricated claims or data.

For example, some companies who have had issues with greenwashing include Volkswagen, Nestlé, and H&M (Grant, 2019).

The importance of sustainable branding

The current trend of consumers demanding environmentally-friendly goods is great news for the environment. However, it is always important to check that brands are living up to their promises.

For more information about how you can contribute to environmental causes, check out the blogs on *THRIVE* Project!

References

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