

brand green: mainstream or forever niche?

Wendy Gordon



“green alliance...

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SPENCER**



'Brand Green: Mainstream or forever niche?'

by Wendy Gordon

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Green Alliance

Green Alliance is one of the UK's foremost environmental groups. An independent charity, its mission is to promote sustainable development by ensuring that the environment is at the heart of decision-making. It works with senior people in government, parliament, business and the environmental movement to encourage new ideas, dialogue and constructive solutions.

new politics series

Green Alliance's *new politics* pamphlets provide a platform for eminent thinkers to examine interactions between current political debate and environmental thinking. The views expressed are those of the authors.

Other pamphlets in the new politics series are:

- *In our backyard: The social promise of environmentalism* by Ken Worpole, September 2000
- *Mind over matter: Greening the new economy* by Charles Leadbeater, September 2000,
- *Sustaining Europe: A common cause for the European Union in the new century*, by Ian Christie, December 1999

contents

foreword Alan Mitchell	4
introduction Beatrice Rose	7
brand green Wendy Gordon	11
what we say and what we really do	
how do we connect with brands?	
connecting with the heart	
green brands still believe us when we say we want more information	
green is not a category	
the greening of mainstream brands	
making green brands work	
where next for brand green? Beatrice Rose	33
notes	38

foreword

Alan Mitchell, Business Writer

“The green cause would be boosted no end if brands took ‘green’ to their hearts.”

Democracies are always conservative. By definition, every new idea is entertained initially by only a few people, leaving the majority either indifferent or hostile. To the extent that brands are democratic – forever seeking a majority ‘vote’ from their target audience – they, too, are conservative.

This conservatism represents a huge challenge to campaigners, such as the green movement, who look to brands as a conduit or instrument of change. Marketers instinctively appeal to the majority. If the environmental is not central to this majority’s concerns then it can never make it to the top of the marketing agenda.

That’s one dilemma raised by Wendy Gordon in this pamphlet. The green cause would be boosted no end if brands took ‘green’ to their hearts. But that’s not happening because, generally speaking, consumers show little signs of letting environmental concerns transform their purchasing and consumption habits.

Enter conundrum number two. The other side of the democratic coin is that once a majority embraces an idea it becomes an unstoppable force. So how can the green movement persuade more people, more effectively?

As Wendy points out, it’s a common fallacy that effective persuasion is driven by rational argument. Yes, people always have reasons for the things they do. But they rarely change long-established habits and behaviours simply because someone has presented a strong intellectual case. We all have a habit of ‘knowing’ that we should do X, while still doing Y anyway. ‘Wants’ and ‘oughts’ rarely point happily in the same direction, and when they clash ‘wants’ often win. Yet, time and again, so-called ‘green

brands' have grounded their appeal to consumers on 'ought'. To little effect.

Hence the impasse now facing the movement. On the one hand, consumer-focused 'mainstream' brands remain lukewarm about the environmental cause. On the other hand, issue-focused 'green' brands have painted themselves into a marginal, niche corner – appealing only to the passionate few.

Is there a way out of this impasse? Perhaps. Green brands can become more sophisticated in their marketing, stealing a few mainstream brands' clothes. Meanwhile the relationship between mainstream brands and consumers is evolving. Slowly, in a two-steps-forward-one-step-back kind of way, consumers are beginning to expect more of brands. As well as buying the benefits of the product, increasingly, they also want access to the benefits generated by the company itself: its skills and know-how, its information, infrastructure and resources, its influence.

On environmental matters, for example, there's a growing expectation that companies should use their know-how, resources and influence simply to 'do the right thing' without making too much of a song and dance about it. 'Doing the right thing' is qualitatively different from most other brand values. It comes 'from within': from the values and judgements of the people who run the company. It puts a premium on integrity and, yes, a degree of leadership; of sticking up for 'what's right'. Along the way it earns people's respect, plus a different level of trust that goes beyond simply keeping product promises.

It also helps to turn 'ought-based' marketing into 'want-based' marketing. After all, most consumers want to do business with companies with a reputation for 'doing the right thing'. And when consumers positively want something, mainstream marketers sit up and take note.

“There’s a growing expectation that companies should use their know-how, resources and influence simply to ‘do the right thing’.”

Wendy's analysis of both 'green' and mainstream brand marketing is unforgiving. But it has a positive outcome. It pinpoints significant opportunities for campaigners and companies alike. It opens up fruitful common ground for both sides. Now comes the exciting bit: exploring this new territory. Some leading brands are already doing so.

Alan Mitchell is a marketing journalist and commentator and author of Right Side Up: Building Brands in the Age of the Organized Consumer. A contributing editor to MarketingWeek and editorial board member of Journal of Brand Management, Alan contributes columns and articles for a wide range of business publications.

introduction

Beatrice Rose, Green Alliance

It is hard to find anyone who doesn't believe that, to make real environmental progress, we have to find a way of changing consumption patterns. The way we choose, use and dispose of goods and services has an impact, and different consumption patterns mean different impacts. Governments can lay down the law, businesses can streamline processes, but the consumer must join in.

Yet changing consumer behaviour is no easy task. In a recent *Financial Times* article, Jill Johnstone from the National Consumer Council sums this up when she says, 'there's a bundle of factors that consumers are trying to meet within their price range. The environment is on the list but not at the top.' Given competing priorities, the environment slips down most people's purchasing hierarchy. This is compounded by confusion over which product is the least damaging, cynicism over green claims and a general lack of awareness of environmental issues.

So how do we reach the sea of consumers whose concern for the environment does not translate into buying green? Perhaps we've been coming at it from the wrong direction. We may not yet have persuaded people to be green, but we've persuaded them to do a lot of other things: use mobile phones, drink in coffee shops or spend £80 on branded trainers. There's a skilled group of professionals whose job it is to persuade people to change their behaviour. Why not ask them how to make us green?

That is what *Brand Green* is about. We have taken a leading light of the marketing world, Wendy Gordon and asked her how she would literally brand green. In this pamphlet, Wendy gives us an insight

“There's a skilled group of professionals whose job it is to persuade people to change their behaviour. Why not ask them how to make us green?”

“Information and exhortation are not enough to change people’s minds at the shop counter.”

into the mind of the consumer and the implications for connecting green brands to everyday lives.

The aim of *Brand Green* is not to undo the valuable work that has been done on green consumerism and sustainable consumption. It aims instead to prompt a different approach to marketing greener goods, and to building environmental standards into mainstream brands. Neither is it intended to downplay the role of government policy and legislation. New EU legislation on integrated product policy and producer responsibility, eco-labelling, regulation and environmental taxation, will all play a crucial role in delivering less environmentally-damaging consumer products. But *Brand Green* argues that, in this age of choice, fashion, innovation and heady individualism, we are missing a trick if we don’t play the rules of the branding game.

A recent advisory committee report to the UK Government, focusing on the role of retailers, highlighted this missed opportunity saying, ‘retailers have expert in-house marketing teams and copious opportunities to market to the public and yet these conventional tools are only just beginning to be used to market environmental values.’¹ Retailers, manufacturers and marketing agencies could make real in-roads by channelling marketing knowledge into branding ‘green’.

Seizing the opportunities set out in *Brand Green* will require action from all sectors. On the one hand, the environmental movement will have to learn that information and exhortation are not enough to change people’s minds at the shop counter. On the other, the world of marketing will have to realise that they have a clear role to play in encouraging sustainable consumption. Government has to offer leadership, to give business the incentive to channel marketing budgets into greening mainstream brands, and towards moving niche products into the mainstream. The UK Government’s *Are you doing your bit?* advertising campaign² was a

nudge in the right direction, but more funds and creative partnerships are needed to really push this agenda forward.

In short, government needs to set the framework and provide leadership for more sustainable consumption. Companies need to apply sophisticated marketing strategies to greener products and services. NGOs need to praise the products which are greener, and shame those which are not. And consumers need to see the value of buying into brand green.

In *Brand Green*, Wendy Gordon sets out her analysis of the problem, looking at how consumers encounter brands, how they perceive the environment, and how we should tackle the discrepancy between intention and action. Green Alliance then puts forward some ideas on how business, government, NGOs and the consumer could move into a new realm of more sustainable consumption patterns.

“Companies need to apply sophisticated marketing strategies to greener products and services.”

a brief history of green consumerism

The first wave of green consumerism in the UK was triggered in the late 80s by high profile NGO campaigns and media coverage of vanishing rainforests and holes in the ozone layer. *The Green Consumer Guide*, by John Elkington and Julia Hailes,³ was published at the peak of this wave, and sold over a million copies.

But the promise of a mass green consumer movement did not materialise. Numbers of dedicated 'ethical' consumers stayed fairly constant, whilst the mainstream appeared untouched. The flurry of ecolabels and green claims at the end of the 1980s was met with increased cynicism over 'greenwash' and low levels of understanding in the face of increasingly complex and diffuse environmental problems.

Despite the apparent stagnation of the green consumer market during the 1990s, a developing discourse around corporate social responsibility and an expectation that governments and business should take action on the environment slowly began to build from 1995 onwards.

Brands and corporate citizenship are now being brought together under the banner of what Michael Wilmott of the Future Foundation terms 'citizen brands'⁴. CEOs, policy-makers and NGOs increasingly agree that the leading companies of the future will succeed by incorporating environmental and social values into their brands.

A new wave of green products is also emerging – innovative brands which offer benefits to the consumer. The organic food market is a striking example of a green brand which also offers tangible health benefits. But other smart brands are coming into the market place which compete with mainstream brands in terms of quality, innovation and choice. And gradually, more and more consumers are starting to respond.

brand green

Wendy Gordon

‘Green is the colour
Ford’s new man shows America the way’

The Guardian, October 31, 2001

If only a headline like this were to appear in the national newspapers every day featuring a different company – say Unilever, Procter & Gamble or Kraft.

The story is the usual one of a boardroom battle, falling sales and lacklustre products. The new CEO of Ford has chosen the events of September 11th to push through his long-term efforts at selling environmentally-friendly cars to customers who have taken it as their ‘divine right to drive gas guzzling cars at absurdly low rates of petroleum tax, wherever they like’. The article requests the CEO, Bill Ford, to re-interpret the famous remark of his grandfather Henry Ford and tell customers ‘you can have any colour you like. As long as it’s green’.

If this were to happen more broadly across industries, the green consumption patterns of ordinary people would change dramatically.

Most companies do not take this stance. Nor do they have a CEO who is prepared to go out on a limb in this way, knowing that his customers are not demanding a green product.

Ordinary people are guzzlers of gas, paper and all the other natural resources and energy that is involved in bringing products to market. They remain unmoved by eco-products and ethical services. This is because nowadays people in sophisticated

“You can have any
colour you like. As long
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“We are drawn to brands we trust, brands that are different from the rest, brands that are innovative, brands that appeal to the emotions.”

consumer cultures such as the UK buy brands rather than commodities. We are drawn to brands we trust, brands that are different from the rest, brands that are innovative, brands that appeal to the emotions, brands that signify something intelligent or interesting about the user, and brands whose parent company behaves well.

It isn't that people don't care about green products and services but simply that they aren't prepared to give them special dispensation to ignore the rules of the game called brand. This is a game that was popularised in the mid-eighties and which has become increasingly sophisticated. Playing it competitively nowadays is difficult for all brand players but particularly niche brands, like most green products.

The challenge for the green movement as a whole is to convert the groundswell of popular concern about the environment and ethical responsibility into personal accountability, altered behaviour and effective action. Those involved with products and services in particular have to learn how to connect brands that have green credentials to the everyday lives of ordinary human beings, so that we consume less or consume differently.

The purpose of *Brand Green* is twofold: to show how green products and brands can move from micro to mainstream product and service sectors by using mass-market marketing strategies; and to explore how mainstream brands that are fighting for a share of heart, mind and wallet can decide whether or not the environmental credentials of the company or the brand itself can help it to differentiate from its competitors.

what we say and what we really do

First, let us take a look at how people relate to brands, and then we can see what this means for green brands. ‘The consumer-brand relationship’ is a phrase frequently bandied about by the marketing departments and head offices of the land; the theory being that if you understand the dynamics of this relationship, the brand and the consumer will walk hand in hand into a rosy and profitable future. But this is both idealistic and unrealistic. ‘Relationship’ is far too anthropomorphic a term to use for the way in which ordinary people interact with brands. A relationship is usually mutual, has agreed reciprocal parameters and involves feelings (as in a business or personal relationship). People, however, interact with most of the brands in their lives in a more opportunistic way.

If you put a bunch of marketers together in a room and ask them to talk about what consumers want, one of them will surely say: ‘people don’t say what they mean and don’t mean what they say’. There is a gap between what people say they want, and what they actually buy when faced with the moment of truth about what to put in the shopping trolley.

Consider the apocryphal story about a market research study that was undertaken about the likely success of mobile phones. People were asked whether or not they intended to buy a mobile phone when they reached the shops. The answer was a resounding 98 per cent ‘no’. But today, just over two thirds of the UK population are users of mobile phones.

There are many other examples of people saying ‘yes’ and behaving ‘no’, or vice versa. People said they would never buy herbal teas, yet the number of different kinds and flavours on the shelves of supermarkets gives testament to how wrong they were. Market research for Coca-Cola suggested that people would buy

“People don’t say what they mean and don’t mean what they say.”

“How can my puny choices make any difference to solving the world’s problems?”

new formula Coca-Cola, but they turned away from it en masse when it was produced and launched.

The same is true in relation to environmental and ethical products. What we say is not what we do.

Statistics now reveal a correlation between green attitudes and green behaviour dubbed the ‘30:3 ratio’; 30 per cent of people claim to be concerned about the environmental and ethical integrity of products and services they purchase and yet only three per cent translate this attitude into behaviour. The Co-operative Bank’s *Who are the ethical consumers?* survey in 2000⁵ showed this clearly.

Most people, concerned or not, continue to consume products in the way they have in the past. They remain immune, on the whole, to the propositions of ‘green’ products and are adept at rationalising why they do not buy them. In fact, the majority of people in this country seem determined not to change their behaviour despite the continuing barrage of information that warns of the consequences to the planet, to their immediate environment, or to their personal health and well-being.

Of course, it is not just because of the unsophisticated way in which green brands sell themselves that awareness and action remain disconnected. Problems of personal agency in the face of vast problems requiring collective action (such as climate change) have an important impact on decision-making: ‘how can my puny choices make any difference to solving the world’s problems?’ The 2001 – 2002 *British Social Attitudes report*⁶ highlights this problem of agency, along with other factors such as cynicism and lack of market price signals that provide any incentive to buy environmentally-friendly goods and services. This is explored in the next section, through a look at the difference between people’s ‘circle of concern’ and ‘circle of influence’.

Even the tiny minority who do translate concern into action are not changing their consumption behaviour dramatically. The Co-operative Bank *Ethical Purchasing Index (EPI) 2001*⁷ shows a steady increase in ethical purchasing, which is encouraging, but it is still distinctly patchy. People may recycle their newspapers and bottles regularly, yet still drive to work in a car alone. They may refuse to buy Nike products on the grounds of social ethics, yet buy products that are not biodegradable. They may worry about the plight of cattle going to slaughter (and therefore avoid beef), but continue to buy battery-farmed chickens.

Totem behaviour, inconsistent and illogical behaviour, occurs in other categories of products and services too. Low fat alternatives such as yoghurt, Diet Coke and the Be Good to Yourself range from Sainsbury's are often bought to signal both to ourselves and to others our consciousness of healthy eating and weight control. But these brands, like clothes chosen to suit different contexts, only communicate identity at a particular moment. The same man who buys Be Good To Yourself will eat and drink many brands that are seemingly inconsistent with the identity of 'health and weight-consciousness'. So while he may choose a low-calorie sandwich as part of his lunch, he won't think twice about having a lager with friends in the pub after work. This is because at these moments he is constructing his identity differently.

Buying green or simply 'talking green' constructs a personal identity. During the act of purchase or whilst the product/service is being used, concern for the planet or child labour in India is 'who I am being right now'. Tomorrow or even later today will be a completely different story.

**“Buying green or simply
‘talking green’ constructs
a personal identity.”**

“Successful brands share a world-view about the way ordinary people connect with them.”

how do we connect with brands?

There are many factors that contribute to a brand's success. One critical element is that successful brands share a world-view about the way ordinary people connect with them.

They understand:

- what matters to people in their lives
- how and in what direction culture is changing
- how to lead rather than follow
- how to 'walk the talk' of brand integrity

Successful brands stand firmly in the real world, amongst people and culture, and search for qualities in the brand DNA that are relevant and unique. They are willing to do things differently and combine fact and intuition in the search to find a contemporary role for the brand in contemporary life.

Unsuccessful brands have a brand-centric view of the world, one that is often lacking both perspective and reality. Those responsible for brands such as these tend to operate within the boundaries of safe and predictable processes and are disconnected both from their customers and the changing nature of social life. The result is that they become afraid to lead with authority.

It is increasingly difficult for mass-market brands to follow these basic principles for brand success. Tried and tested methods developed in the past no longer seem effective. This is because the pressure to grow revenue and profit often results in a loss of brand integrity through cost-cutting measures. Decisions are made that over time undermine the integrity of the brand. For the senior executives of these organisations what matters to people in the context of their lives is far less important than what happens to their bonus or their share price.

It is easier for niche brands to live in the real world. Easyjet, Pret à Manger, Holmes Place and Starbucks are examples of growing niche brands. What people encounter is a brand that has integrity. In other words, these brands understand what matters to people, they are in touch with cultural and societal changes and have a very clear view of the brand DNA.

Products, services and organisations that have green credentials or ambitions can learn from successful niche brands. But they will have to give up an out-dated linear model of thinking about brands that rests on the idea that people need to be persuaded to believe the benefits of a green alternative.

Linear models of thinking are still alive and well today, four decades after their invention. AIDA (Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action) is a famous linear and sequential model of consumer behaviour. According to this model, to buy a product/brand, a consumer must first become aware of it, awareness requires conscious attention. Factual information will create interest which in turn generates desire that turns into action, i.e. the decision to buy.

Whilst this model of thinking about how to sell products to consumers was effective in the years when products had 'unique selling points' (genuinely new technology or second generation improvements), it is not an effective market strategy today. Nowadays there is a level playing field. Think about beer, shower gels, coffee, airlines, banks and supermarkets. Brands copy one another in months, and there is little to differentiate them other than promotions, advertising campaigns and minor tweaks to the product or service.

Yet the linear model is the one that green has been using. First, the green movement has been making people aware of the environmental or ethical dangers, then it provides us with information about alternatives. This in itself is believed to be sufficiently convincing and motivating, increasing desire, and

“Products that have green credentials or ambitions can learn from successful niche brands.”

“People connect with brands for fleeting moments of time in a day.”

resulting in action, whether it be changing from a familiar brand of coffee to an ethical alternative, or beginning to recycle newspapers and bottles.

This is not how people interact with brands. They do not follow a linear decision-making process. People connect with brands for fleeting moments of time in a day, and there are multiple reasons for selection:

‘It’s a brand I know – a quick short-cut so I do not have to think.’

‘It’s a brand I trust – it is predictable, consistent, performs well and I won’t waste my money.’

‘It is part of the ‘room design’ of my identity – the way I communicate who I am at this moment in time, in this context and with these people.’

‘What I make a brand mean depends on the myriad of encounters I have had with it.’

This dynamic set of associations is built up through the direct and indirect messaging system used by the brand.

Green products, services, brands and organisations need to understand this complex messaging system used by both mass market and niche brands. They also need to understand that brands cannot control meaning, they can only transmit cues which people interpret in their own way. It is people who create meaning and meanings are dynamic, not fixed.

are brands good or are brands bad?

Recently the debate about whether brands are a good or bad thing has become intense. Led by Naomi Klein's book *No Logo: Taking aim at brand bullies*⁸, there are now a number of authors who take the stance that consumers are manipulated by big corporations and big brands. The theme is that companies sell aspirations, lifestyle and image via their brands, and thereby control and manipulate our minds, not only in terms of choice of product but by exerting power in other areas: sport, media, music, art, politics, education and so on.

The new breed of brands no longer use name, logo and performance promise to identify and differentiate commodity products, but develop brands as 'meaning brokers'. The brand is a concept, an experience and/or a lifestyle and expands into our cultural space, taking on meanings far outside its inherent (product) capabilities.

No Logo has become a bible for the anti-globalisation movement. Brands are seen to be symbols of American corporate power. Global brands generate a number of worries concerning environmental damage, human rights abuses, sweat labour and profiteering.

But, far from being pawns to corporate brand machinations, consumers are sophisticated consumers of brands. They are not that easy to manipulate. Today, consumers are bombarded with choices. They are harder to reach, they are able to see through inauthentic brands and marketing strategies and they use brands not only to simplify choice and guarantee quality, but because they add fun and interest to the more mundane aspects of life.

Nowadays brands have to be accountable. Some brands are already taking much greater care to be publicly accountable. Nike has been forced to improve manufacturing standards, and the boss of Coca-Cola was sacked for an arrogant and dismissive attitude to a contamination incident in Belgium. All major brands are potentially 'exposable' in what John Elkington calls 'the X-ray environment'⁹ of mass media, the internet and NGO scrutiny.

Brands of the future will have to stand not only for product quality and a desirable image. They will also have to signal something wholesome about the company behind the brand.

This ‘something’ is social responsibility. Brands can no longer afford to behave badly and assume that they will get away with it.

Brands hold one of the keys to changing consumption patterns. Big brands will, in the future, have to become more responsible, otherwise they run the risk of going out of business if their ethical or environmental irresponsibility were to become public knowledge. This has to be good news for the green movement. Naomi Klein has done it a huge favour.

selling green products and services

Green brands do not understand the rules of mainstream marketing. Customers and potential customers immediately know whether or not a brand is aimed at a wide range of people ‘for me’ or whether it is targeting a particular kind of person with a distinctive attitude of mind ‘for someone unlike me’. They know whether the company making it is substantial (national or global) or tiny (regional or local). They read the signs, the hidden body language of marketing

And it matters.

communicating in code

All brands communicate in code. There is the surface message (‘what they say’) and the hidden message (‘how they say it’). The hidden message is often more heartfelt than the surface message because it uses sensory and emotional cues (colours, symbols, shapes, textures, images) rather than purely rational ones. The hidden messages play a very important role in how people make decisions at point of choice.

Mainstream means ‘popular’ and ‘popular’ usually means established and trustworthy. People talk about choosing to buy ‘tried and tested’ products and services rather than completely new ones. Often, people explain why they have chosen a familiar rather than a new brand by giving examples of when a purchase had turned out to be a waste of money because the product or service failed to perform against well-known benchmarks.

rules of the game

There are many different kinds of signals that communicate covertly rather than overtly whether a product or service is ‘mainstream’ or ‘niche’:

- **Brand values** vs. product or service ingredients.
- **Packaging** – colourful, evocative, glossy, sensory vs. sensible, rational, cheap looking and lacking in sensory reward.
- **Outlet** – one of the big five supermarkets vs. specialist shops or small retailers. High Street vs independent retailer.
- **Merchandising** – large displays and facings at eye level on the shelves vs. a small space on the bottom shelf.
- **Promotions and offers in-store** – on popular brands rather than unknown ones.
- **Price** – easy to understand in relation to competitive brands.
- **Range, variants and size alternatives** – the wider the range the more mainstream the brand.
- **Distribution** – available across the country or internationally.
- **Advertising** – noticeable advertising at peak times, repeated often vs. lightweight off peak advertising, or none at all.
- **Other forms of paid-for communication** – sponsorship, PR, posters, promotions and offers, coverage in newspapers, local initiatives, news about the company or its staff.
- **Word of mouth** – hearing people talk about a product or noticing other people using it or buying it.
- **Heritage** – been around for a long time vs. new kid on the block.

“It is possible to become a strong niche brand by punching above your weight and fighting smart.”

Many of the environmentally-friendly brands available in shops today would not be able to satisfy all or even most of the twelve criteria listed in ‘the rules of the game’ above. They lack the stature and presence of mainstream brands. One reason for this is that they do not have deep pockets like Procter & Gamble or Unilever. But it is possible to become a strong niche brand by punching above your weight and fighting smart. The Body Shop and Pret à Manger are both retail brands that have established a powerful niche presence. Other niche brands like Absolut Vodka, Hipp organic baby food and Jordan’s cereals are examples of fast moving consumer goods brands with clarity of vision about building niche strength.

In contrast many environmental and ethical brands consciously or unconsciously communicate that the environmental or ethical benefit of the product supersedes all other possible reasons for choosing it. But this may not mirror the reality of how consumers choose in different categories.

Ecover is an example of a brand that has been sold in supermarkets in Britain since 1988. The brand name features the line ‘effective products for people who care about a clean environment’ supported by the brand visual showing pine trees, a lake and mountains in the distance. The pack copy also claims that it ‘cuts through grime and grease’ and that it contains a ‘mild disinfectant’. But these are secondary messages, with low impact.

Mr Muscle on the other hand, boldly shouts its brand name with a visual device that suggests power and cleanliness (orange and green speed marks). The pack features two primary claims: ‘kitchen’ and ‘anti-bacterial action’; and one secondary claim: ‘dissolves grease and kills germs’.

Although Ecover might perform as well in blind testing as Mr Muscle, the brand and pack codes do not communicate the same level of effectiveness and specificity of use. Although I, as a consumer, care about the environment, I want my kitchen to be

free of germs and power-cleaned. This is more important to me. Ecover looks neither modern nor effective and so when push comes to shove I will choose a mainstream, familiar brand instead.

Nowadays an altruistic or rational message is not, on its own, sufficiently motivating for the majority of people to change their consumption habits.

Branded products and services that offer environmental and ethical integrity need to learn how to do battle with competitors using the mainstream rules of the game. They also need to connect with the heart as well as the head of consumers.

connecting with the heart

Emotional coding influences what we notice about two brands, how much licence we give them to surprise or disappoint us and how willing we are to let them rise into consciousness.

Freedom Foods, a label that has marketed itself very successfully with the support of animal welfare groups and the RSPCA, has broken through the niche barrier, claiming over ten per cent of the retail market.

It is successful because in the UK animal welfare is an emotive and important issue. The RSPCA instantly signifies animal protection. The brand name is meaningful. British people are known to care about pets and animals. Freedom Foods immediately resonates with deeply felt emotions. Brands like Ecover and Down to Earth do not have the emotional resonance of Freedom Foods. They rely on thinking processes more than the gut-level intuitive ones.

The challenge for products and services with environmental and ethical credentials is to find the way to connect with people through the heart and senses rather than the mind and logic.

“An altruistic or rational message is not sufficiently motivating for the majority of people to change their consumption habits.”

green brands still believe us when we say we want more information

Draw two circles on a page and title the first one the 'circle of concern' (issues that worry but are beyond personal control) and the second the 'circle of influence' (issues that worry that can be personally influenced). Now write down the anxieties that fall into each circle.

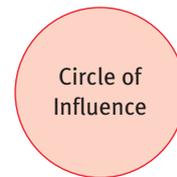
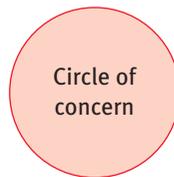
For most ordinary people the big geo-political issues that affect the planet fall into the first circle. Climate change, destruction of the rainforests, depletion of natural resources and the population explosion are some of the most commonly stated ones.

The circle of concern is the circle of dialectic: well reasoned arguments, facts and counter-facts.

The circle of influence, on the other hand, is personal. It includes 'me' and my immediate environment: 'my house, my street, my family, my friends, my neighbourhood and my region. It includes all those issues that are in my power to change by altering my own behaviour.'

Examples include: litter, graffiti, personal safety, pollution, traffic noise and density, violence to ordinary folk, family health, my children, local schooling and education, local shops and my/our job security. The circle of influence is characterised by things that affect my life on a day-to-day basis.

The two circles rarely overlap.



Exhortations to clean up the local neighbourhood, reduce the number of car journeys to the shops, school or work, eat organic food or buy recycled toilet paper seem to have little effect on the majority of people even though these issues fall well inside the circle of influence.

When people are asked to explain the discrepancy between their concerns and their actions, there are a number of common responses:

‘I need more information.’

‘You can’t believe everything you hear – one moment they say one thing and then the next week you read that it is untrue.’

‘I do what I can but it won’t make a difference.’

‘The government (council, school, work, hospital etc.) should do something about it. They are the worst offenders.’

On the face of it people seem to want more information.

Underneath this seemingly straightforward need lies an artesian well of cynicism and distrust about the usefulness and or trustworthiness of information.

Information on its own rarely changes behaviour. It depends on its source. No one really believes the claims of advertisers or celebrities who endorse brands. Politicians and authority figures are not trusted either. Newspapers exaggerate, TV programmes lie, manifestos over-promise and so on.

So whom do we trust? We trust our friends and relatives, people we know.

This is where those who work with green issues, brands or corporate reputation are most naïve. They believe that when consumers ask for more information, this is what they want.

“Information on its own rarely changes behaviour.”

“Giving consumers more facts and figures about what is going on ‘out there’ does little or nothing to change personal behaviour.”

Giving consumers more facts and figures about what is going on ‘out there’ does little or nothing to change personal behaviour. It enlarges the circle of concern but does not widen or activate the circle of influence.

Providing information that is not cynically rejected must begin with an understanding of what environmental and ethical terms really mean to particular audiences. Meaning differs depending on whom you are, where you live, education, affluence and so on.

A recent research report called *Rainforests are a long way from here*¹⁰ illustrates this point. The study objective was to understand the environmental views and priorities of disadvantaged groups in different settings. There were different interpretations of key environmental terms depending on where the people lived. Pollution was related to dog mess and litter rather than emissions from cars or the local chemical factory. The term ‘local environment’ meant less to people than ‘your surroundings’. What appear to be environmental problems to outsiders are part of ‘home’ to insiders. Concerns are tempered by loyalty to local employers or to acceptance of the situation as a fact of life.

Many people, not only the disadvantaged, tend to associate the word environment with pollution and litter rather than nature or natural heritage. ‘Ethical’ is another term that is understood to mean a variety of things: responsible labour policy, investment in companies with good track records on human rights, respect for animal rights and so on. The lesson? Not everyone interprets phrases and words in exactly the same way.

Communication of information can be achieved in many different ways and its trustworthiness depends on its source. A stamp from the RSPCA immediately conveys respect for animal rights. Approval by Amnesty International or by a reputable child protection agency signals an ethical stance on child labour policies. The Soil Association mark reassures people about organic

credentials. Endorsement by trusted retail brands works in the same way.

The context of information is important too. As a consumer I might distrust advertising but trust an article I read in my local newspaper. I may not believe a TV programme on national television, but I might buy Morrisons' re-usable string bags for my grocery shopping, because they have encouraged me through price and their own environmental stance to change my behaviour. There is much to accomplish in helping consumers differentiate between descriptors that are marketing hype and those that have integrity.

Another approach to activating the circle of concern is to bring the issue closer to home. A fundamental problem with the circle of concern is the distance between issues of concern and the everyday lives of people. At the root of the consumption crisis lies a breakdown in the relationships of proximity between consumers and producers. Ways need to be found to bridge this distance. If our only contact with the food we eat is, for example, as plastic-wrapped chicken legs on a supermarket shelf, there is little connection with the origin of the product and thus how it is produced. Farmers markets and other local sourcing initiatives provide one way of bringing the consumer closer to the source of the products. Another route could be through advancements in technology. If new technologies are seen to be eroding distance in some spheres, then why not in the sphere of consumption, by providing consumers with better supply chain information for example?

“At the root of the consumption crisis lies a breakdown in the relationships of proximity between consumers and producers.”

green is not a category

The idea of 'green' is an abstract one. It is not a category that has a core set of associations and expectations that most people might share, such as financial services. Green is not a brand that can control its promise to the consumer and match delivery to

“Green is generally far too depressing and far too serious.”

promise. Green is simply a generic term for a large number of different ideas, institutions and initiatives as well as brands, products or services.

The way in which ordinary people encounter ‘green’ varies from person to person. Each person creates their own set of meanings based on the dynamic nature of their daily encounters with ‘green’ issues, products, services and brands as well as the behaviour of others.

Unfortunately there are far more negative daily encounters than positive ones. This is one of the reasons that people feel that their own actions will make little difference.

The negative set of associations that most people hold in their minds about ‘green’ is clearly demonstrated by asking people to personify ‘green’ as if it were a brand:

‘Green is thoughtful, conscientious, determined, socially and environmentally aware.’

‘Green is highly principled, progressive, freethinking and has a social conscience.’

‘Green is wacky, alternative, annoying, opinionated, virtuous and responsible.’

‘Green is hippie, exclusive, demanding’

‘Green is argumentative, militant and intolerant.’

Whilst some of these imagined character traits are admirable, they are not the kind that make most people want to associate themselves with this kind of person.

“Green must learn how to connect with people in a positive, fun and engaging way.”

Green is generally far too depressing and far too serious. This has a halo effect on all brands with green or ethical credentials, and is one of the fundamental reasons why these brands fail to break through into the mass market. Green brands need to substitute

some of the ‘worthiness’ with humour and lightness. The grass-roots, radical element of the green movement, the road protesters and anti-globalisation movement use humour very effectively; Adbusters¹¹, for example, subvert mainstream adverts through altering or adding to them in ways which are generally very funny, as well as getting the message across. We need to draw this wilder, more artistic and fun side of the green movement into the creation of green brands.

Green must learn how to connect with people in a positive, fun and engaging way. Until it learns how to do this, consumption behaviour will never change dramatically.

“No company or brand can run the risk of putting their reputation on the line.”

the ‘greening’ of mainstream brands

The process of building a brand is not a cosmetic task like having a makeover in Harrods. If the company lacks moral substance or if the brand itself has little intrinsic attraction or competitive advantage for people, no amount of expensive make-up can make it desirable. After a short while, people will see through the veneer.

Building a brand that people trust takes time. Being innovative is both an investment and a risk. Understanding the daily lives of people and the role of the brand amongst the segment of customers that are most likely to buy it requires a new kind of research and a new approach to marketing: holistic not linear.

In these times of global activism, global unrest and changing values, no company or brand can run the risk of putting their reputation on the line. Corporate reputation is a new agenda item for senior managers. Outside experts can provide practical guidance on how to make companies (and the brands they represent) squeaky clean.

“Green attributes can help differentiate from the competition.”

Many mainstream brands are battling to find a competitive edge. Green attributes can help differentiate from the competition.

Green attributes can provide the reason that consumers will use to post-rationalise a purchase. However, it is unlikely to be the reason that motivates change of brand, except amongst the small minority of people who are already committed to the green cause. With a little effort, it may become simple good practice to offer green benefits alongside the core promise of the brand. Consumers will ‘use’ those benefits in different ways at different times, thus creating more touch points that are positive.

When things are falling apart, people look for ways to unite, bond and relate. Brands and companies with green credentials are fortunate. They have a real point of differentiation from most of their competitors. But they need to look out and over the parapet of Fortress Green and connect with the broad changes in culture that draw people together.

making green brands work

Green brands can work. It is possible to help people change their own behaviour. But it is complicated and has to be tackled from as many directions as possible:

- Connect with what matters to people in a way that engages with feelings and emotions. Feelings and emotions can be stimulated in many ways.
- Think about the sensory cues communicated through the packaging design (store, brochure, service design) and construction.
- Think about the essence of the promise encapsulated in the DNA of the brand and communicate this powerfully. Use overt and covert cues – facts to support the core promise of the brand and metaphor to engage with people’s feelings.

- Think holistically. Ask yourself the question: ‘how will customers touch this brand (product, service or company)?’ and make sure that every encounter is a positive one. Does the place where the brand is found communicate the message we intend? Do the people that sell it or buy it convey the values that the brand embodies? Do all the communications support one another? What can the brand sponsor that connects with certain kinds of people and how can we do this in a way that is not simply wallpaper? Is the product/service good enough to compete seriously with the leaders? Are we over reliant on green credentials when the market is being defined differently by consumers?
- Stop thinking about ‘the consumer’ as a stranger you’ve never met. We are all consumers. Think about what matters to people like yourself, your friends, your family and your colleagues. This will give you a sense check about whether or not what you have decided holds true in real life.
- Remember that we all suffer from information overload and information scepticism. Use facts sparingly. Facts help people post-rationalise a purchase; they rarely motivate in advance.
- If you – the brand or company – manage to move away from linear thinking, the brand is far more likely to succeed.
- Connect with the way that society and culture is changing and lead rather than follow.
- Build a brand (company) that people trust, that is different from the rest, that is innovative and that signifies intelligence for its customers.



Solar system for Sainsbury's, North Greenwich.



As niche brands become more sophisticated in their marketing techniques and big brands harness and communicate environmental values more boldly, consumption patterns will begin to shift. We are already seeing signs of both emerging, new socially responsible smart brands like Smile (ethical internet banking), Juice (green energy product), Solar Century (photovoltaic panels), Electric City (eco-friendly delivery vehicles) and Divine Chocolate (fairtrade chocolate). At the other end of the scale companies like Unilever and B&Q are communicating values such as sustainably sourced fish or sustainably forested wood into their brands.

Tax incentives and regulation will always play an essential role in influencing choices, so that green behaviour becomes automatic or strongly favoured. But brands can make a difference, and marketing can play a powerful part in shaping choice to benefit the environment. But marketing managers always need to remember that finding ways to connect issues to the everyday lives of ordinary people is the only sustainable strategy.

where next for brand green?

Beatrice Rose, Green Alliance

The path towards more sustainable consumption patterns will require leadership from both business and government. The growing awareness and interest in environmental issues needs to be translated into consumer behaviour, and this means that companies will need to lead rather than follow. Sustainability has to be integrated as a business imperative, into all parts of the business - including the marketing departments.

A recent WWF report, *To Whose Profit?*¹², demonstrates the business case for sustainability: 'A company that ignores ethical, environmental or social issues may destroy value through inadequate management of risks, but may also limit value through missing opportunities.' Sustainable development is steadily rising up the shareholder agenda, too, with investors now looking at the long-term sustainability and risk management strategy of companies on these issues, under the banner of socially responsible investment.

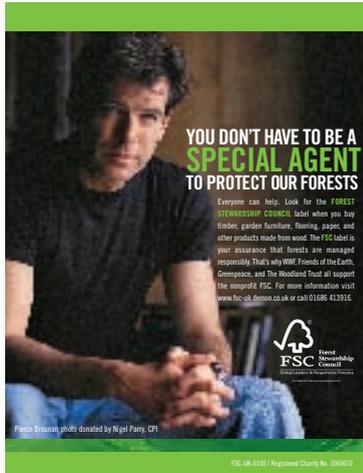
This increasing focus on sustainability means that environmental values need to be integrated into core business objectives, so that they are reflected in all decisions from the product development and strategy level right through to the advertising campaigns and shelf displays. Companies can lead their customers through the green maze, using marketing as a means of educating consumers about key sustainability impacts which brands are having to address, and tapping into consumers' growing awareness of the environment. The 'green' message is unlikely to become a main marketing message, but rather a complementary one – signposting the changes which will become necessary in the future, and highlighting the fact that all products, not just the niche, will need to become more sustainable.



Smart branding by Electric City – a fleet of electric delivery vehicles powered by renewable energy.



The Co-operative Bank's 'Internet Bank with scruples'.



FSC use celebrity appeal to promote sustainably-sourced wood.



There is a long way to go. Although some companies may argue they cannot influence consumer choice, they can and do shape consumption patterns through the products they offer and the way they market them. Companies play an important role in creating our choices, spending millions on marketing and communication strategies to try to influence the purchasing habits of their customers. If business does influence consumer decisions, it must take some responsibility for those choices and direct that influence toward more sustainable products and services.

People make purchasing decisions based on brand preferences, and want to trust the companies behind them to behave responsibly. Some companies are already showing real leadership by making decisions on behalf of their customers in favour of sustainably sourced timber and fish, for example, and then communicating this message in the store. As Wendy Gordon has shown us, people expect brands to be accountable.

As environmental issues become increasingly complex, developing and marketing a truly 'sustainable' product is a real challenge. But certifications like Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)¹³ and Marine Stewardship Council (MSC)¹⁴ offer a benchmark, and these standards will evolve over time as our understanding of how to deliver sustainability develops.

There is no shortage of measures that business, government, NGOs and the consumer can be doing now, to make brand green a reality. Here are some ideas for action.

core business

Environmental values need to be at the heart of business strategy and planning. Retailers and manufacturers that take strategic decisions to phase out products or substances which are known to be environmentally damaging will make their brands stronger. Marks & Spencer's decision to phase out PVC or Unilever's target to have all their fish sourced sustainably by the end of 2005 are good examples of such voluntary measures.

Trade Associations can play a positive role in encouraging collective action and raising standards. The British Retail Consortium's sustainability strategy *Towards Retail Sustainability*¹⁵ is a step towards this. By setting increasingly challenging guidelines, which it expects its members to meet, it can help raise standards across the board. The strategy could, for example, set clear goalposts for increasing the percentage of products which carry MSC, FSC or the EU ecolabel, thereby providing an incentive for companies to integrate sustainability thinking into their marketing objectives.

Government can play a key role in incentivising companies by ratcheting up standards and providing tax incentives to shift the balance in favour of green products (as with lead free petrol) to ensure continuous improvement of environmental performance. For some environmental challenges, such as the phase-out of hazardous chemicals or energy efficiency standards for products, voluntary guidelines could be replaced by negotiated agreements between government and business. This would be backed up by recourse to a tax or regulation if companies did not comply. Government should also improve consumer trust in claims made by companies by enforcing and publicising its Green Claims Code¹⁶, to prevent 'greenwash'. The Green Claims Code should be made mandatory, through negotiations with business and NGOs. It also needs to be better resourced to ensure enforcement and



Divine is now stocked in over 4,500 outlets including Sainsbury's, Safeways and Asda.



Specialist retailer of organic foods and natural remedies.



extended to include misleading, vague claims such as products claiming to be 'natural.'

NGOs also have an important role to play as 'brand editors', publicly praising the leaders in the sustainability field and shaming those who are dragging their heels. There are already examples of this in practice such as IIED's *Race to the Top*¹⁷, a sustainability index for retailers, and Friends of the Earth's *Risky Chemicals League Table*¹⁸ and so on. Increasing the profile of corporate social responsibility and socially responsible investment, and awards by organisations such as Business in the Environment¹⁹, will all assist in pushing environmental values up the corporate agenda.



MSC seeks to harness consumer purchasing power in favour of sustainably-sourced seafood products.

inspiring customers

Business can transform 'green' into a lifestyle aspiration, like good health, so it inspires people, becomes a part of their everyday life. Every company will have its own way of doing this. Here are some examples:

Extending values such as quality to include environmental and social standards would be one approach. Surely high quality product ranges, like Sainsbury's Taste the Difference and Tesco's Finest ranges should include high environmental and social performance in their definition of quality?

Linking environmental values to other consumer benefits such as health and wellbeing. Youngs for example have a new Fish for Life range including their MSC-certified New Zealand Hoki. The range emphasises the message 'Good for you' and 'Good for the Environment'. The packaging and presentation appeal to mainstream consumers who buy convenient, frozen food, and the product sits alongside other mainstream frozen fish, competing on quality and price.

Turning environmental brands into cutting-edge brands with popular appeal: The Big Brother house on Channel Four was powered by solar cells on the front of the house built by Solar Century. The branding of solar power as innovative, modern and fun was visually demonstrated by linking it to the popular TV series and bringing it into the homes of the general public.

Developing more creative partnerships between business, government and NGOs: Greenpeace and Npower for example have teamed up to launch Juice, renewable energy that customers can buy at no extra cost.

Reinvigorating the Government's *Are you doing your bit?* advertising campaign, which promotes individual action on the environment, by joining up with supermarket promotions. If there was a marketing drive on buying energy efficient light bulbs or washing machines reinforced by retailers, environmental organisations and the government it would have far greater impact.

As Alan Mitchell says in the *Foreword*, the exciting part now lies ahead of us. Building environmental values into marketing and communications objectives, could play a significant role in greening consumption patterns. And at the same time, integrating sustainability into company objectives will build stronger, smarter brands. Socially responsible leadership will define the companies of the future.



The Big Brother House powered by solar cells.



Clean renewable energy from Npower, the UK's biggest electricity supplier, in partnership with Greenpeace.

notes

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18. Friends of the Earth's *Risky Chemicals League Table* is available at www.foe.co.uk/campaigns/safer_chemicals/press_for_change/league_table/index.html
19. Further details of *Business in the Environment* available at www.business-in-environment.org.uk

With thanks to the organisations whose logos and images are featured in the pamphlet as follows:

Solar Century: www.solarcentury.co.uk

Electric City: www.electricdelivery.com

Smile: www.smile.co.uk

Forest Stewardship Council: www.fsc.org

Divine Chocolate: www.divinechocolate.com

Fresh and Wild: www.freshandwild.com

Young's: www.youngscaterer.com

Marine Stewardship Council: www.msc.org

Juice: www.npower.com

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Brand Green by Wendy Gordon

It's time to play the rules of the game called brand.

People in sophisticated consumer cultures like the UK buy brands rather than commodities. Marketing has the power to fundamentally shift consumer behaviour. The next all-pervasive must-have could be 'green'. At a time when mainstream brands are battling to find a competitive edge, green attributes could help differentiate from the competition.

Yet 'green' brands are currently confined to a marginal, niche corner. How do we reconcile the 'wants' and 'oughts' of consumer behaviour? Why should companies create greener brands? How do green brands compete in the mainstream?

In *Brand Green* Wendy Gordon gives an insight into the mind of the consumer and the implications for connecting green brands to every day lives. She offers a compelling argument that brands hold a key to changing consumption patterns, and that marketing can play a powerful part in shaping choice to benefit the environment.

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