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Communicating Green Initiatives

by Teresa Todd

In a world of living colors, consumers are increasingly interested in only one: green. That doesn't suggest that everyone became environmentalists overnight, but with the onslaught of media coverage and more than 195 bills, resolutions and amendments introduced by lawmakers addressing global climate change and greenhouse gas emissions, consumers have become more environmentally-aware.

The timing of this eco-centered focus is interesting considering that pollution is not a new phenomenon, nor is fear of overwhelming population growth and depletion of natural resources.

High profile disasters, such as the Exxon Valdez oil spill in 1989, and geopolitical strife, such as American dependence on foreign oil, has resulted in a dramatic shift in public mindset. As a result, more people have adopted the belief that high environmental standards are not just desirable, but their birthright, according to Forest L. Reinhardt, professor at Harvard Business School.

Fifty-nine percent of U.S. citizens believe the government should regulate businesses' environmental messaging to ensure accuracy. Seventy-five percent of investor stakeholder groups believe environmental, social and corporate governance facts can be material to investment performance.

It's these green-themed interests that drive organizations to take action. Businesses have an opportunity to join the eco bandwagon and be at the forefront of green initiatives or risk government imposed regulations down the road.

The Path Is Not Always Clear

But what exactly constitutes green initiatives or green-themed business practices?

Star-Kist Foods, a Heinz company, had mixed success in the late '80s and early '90s as they tried to differentiate their product environmentally. As background, the company's fishing practices for tuna had come under fire with the accidental deaths of many dolphins. Initial marketing research indicated that consumers would be willing to pay a few cents more for "dolphin-safe" tuna. Star-Kist decided to fish in safer waters and raised prices accordingly.

Unfortunately, even the most well-intentioned customers didn't want to part with their money and pay more for a can of tuna even if it was labeled "dolphin-safe". Whether or not the research adequately addressed the issues, Star-Kist was not able to communicate their initiative in a way that resonated with their customers. Star-Kist took a big hit with a failed campaign.

For differentiation to work there must be willingness on the part of the consumer to pay and a credible communication method for letting customers know where a business stands.

Shades of Green

Savvy eco-minded consumers are looking beyond product attributes and gazing into the heart and soul of an organization. How green are business practices within the organization? Does a business practice what it preaches? Do green practices start at the top and trickle down to the lowest hanging fruit?

Communicators have taken key leadership roles within organizations to integrate green business practices into overall business efforts. PR becomes increasingly more important for developing green messages and communicating them to targeted stakeholder groups. It's a practice that can help break through the green clutter and lend credibility to an organization's initiatives.

Communicating Green Commitments

With internal audiences, companies should create a green workplace so that employees regard the organization's efforts as genuine and credible. Using a top-down approach, recycling, carpooling, reducing paper use and other eco-friendly practices should be encouraged. The goal is to organically create a green "workstyle" so that employees carry the organization's green messages to other stakeholder groups, who they interact with on a regular basis.

Taking communication initiatives to external stakeholder audiences, Liz Gorman, VP of corporate responsibility at Cone, Inc., offers four specific best practices:

- Be precise. "Make specific claims that provide quantitative benefits or impacts."
- Be relevant. "Demonstrate a clear connection between the product or service and the environment."
- Be accessible. "Provide consumers with enough information in places where they look."
- Be credible. "Acknowledge the journey you're on and who is helping you along the way."

Case Study: Vino 100 Valencia

Local wine purveyor Vino 100 is trying to help save the planet – one cork at a time. Recently, the neighborhood wine store partnered with eco-capitalist TerraCycle, who "upcycles" used corks - both natural and synthetic - into useable products that are then sold nationally at major retailers.

The initiative is simple: consumers are encouraged to bring used wine bottle corks to the store during normal business hours, regardless of where the wine was originally purchased. In turn, Vino 100 ships the corks to TerraCycle as part of their "Cork Brigade" partnership. No money is exchanged; the benefit achieved is environmental by diverting corks from landfills to marketable consumer products.

The campaign, which began locally in the Santa Clarita Valley, received national attention this summer and rolled out last month throughout the corporate franchise chain.

Vino 100 Valencia has adopted other green practices, including recycling empty wine bottles generated through in-store tastings and events.

Toyota Motor Company's Zero Landfill Impact Initiative

There's real value for companies that make a genuine environmental effort, no matter whether that effort is perceived as large or small.

Toyota Motor Company has spent several decades making a difference in a big way. Since the 1973 oil crisis when materials were in short supply, Toyota changed the way resources were viewed and waste handled. In pursuit of their zero landfill initiative, they took on the challenge of converting waste to resources. The specifics are beyond the scope of this article but suffice it to say that Toyota changed minds as much as they did automobile production processes.

Today, tours are conducted at the Recycling Center at Toyota's Tsutsumi Plant, the first facility where a zero landfill impact was achieved. Members of governmental agencies, representatives of other companies and the general public tour the plant, which serves to increase awareness for Toyota's environmental initiatives.

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