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Pre-thinking Recycling: the New Eco-Consciousness

by Claire Ratushny

September 22, 2008 issue

Companies and their marketers should take note of a new consumer trend that has been slowly evolving, especially since all indications suggest that this shift in the consumer mindset is here to stay.

This new trend has been dubbed "pre-cycling" in some quarters. That's because it's all about "pre-thinking recycling." Whatever we choose to call it, it's important for companies and marketers to take note of this trend because it highlights a fundamental shift in consumer values.

Basically, people are opting to pare down and simplify their lives. Many consumers are becoming more selective about the products they purchase. The concept of "excess" is causing revulsion more than ever before, prompting consumers to purchase fewer products, to buy more in bulk, and then to repurpose as much as they can. Even trendsetters are reorienting their lifestyles in an effort to eliminate unnecessary waste.

Hence the notion of pre-thinking recycling. This cuts down on waste and on recycling. Good news for the environment and overflowing landfills.

None of these ideas are new. They've been embraced by the natural product industry and its devotees, as well as the environmentally conscious, for decades. Over the past couple of years, though, this trend has been catching fire with more mainstream consumers than ever before.

Research conducted by The Intelligence Group and posted in a report it released in May, cited that 45 percent of trendsetters and 14 percent of mainstream consumers have "cut down on bottled water purchases," for one thing. That signifies consumers are either buying in bulk and refilling single bottles or purchasing their own refillable containers.

Many consumers are using canvas shopping bags to avoid plastic, and even cut down on paper bag use. Some cities and supermarket chains have cut the plastic, while others like Whole Foods urge consumers to purchase washable, reusable canvas bags. The idea is catching on.

Fewer people are subscribing to newspapers, preferring to get their media news online, cutting down on paper. In this same vein, an organization called Greendimes enables consumers to sign up on its site to reduce the junk mail they receive. The organization also plants trees with the donations it receives.

Another growing trend: eco-conscious consumers are opting for washable dinnerware again and washable cloth napkins to cut down on paper waste. The cleaning agents they're using are less harsh and chemically derived, as well. Consumers are opting for gentle, yet effective natural cleaners to avoid toxicity in their homes, allergic reactions and asthma in

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their families, and pollutants in the waste stream.

In the long run, all of these measures save precious natural resources. They also cut down dramatically on materials that either have to be recycled or add substantially to our landfills. Given these trends, companies should analyze how they're doing business, and reexamine their product offerings to see what they can do to meet consumers' rising value expectations.

As consumers purchase fewer products, businesses need to start rethinking their strategies. It's survival of the fittest time. At a time when brand loyalties are plummeting, eco-conscious brands are giving consumers reasons to believe.

Implementing measures from an environmental standpoint makes more sense than ever. Better yet: Costs can be cut in many cases, so adopting some of these measures can help companies to make their product offerings more price competitive, bolster their bottom lines and become far more attractive to consumers because they have a great story to tell. One that increasingly resonates with them.

Making products from renewable materials or recycled ones as much as possible is a great option. Using recycled paperboard and plastics or biodegradable materials to package and ship consumer products makes sense, too, as does the use of biodegradable inks. Doing away with extraneous packaging also saves money and cuts down on waste. Some consumer product companies are already doing these things.

By concentrating products where applicable, and making them more efficacious, smaller packaging is required, cutting down on pack sizes and/or weight and making them more energy efficient to ship. Offering refills to consumers so that they can reuse containers over and over again is an old idea whose time has come again. Procter & Gamble laundry detergents are increasingly concentrated, for example. Arm & Hammer's new Essentials™ Multi-Surface Concentrate cleaner is being marketed with a reusable bottle and refills.

Suggesting ideas to consumers on how to repurpose products and product packaging is another idea. Companies might also do it themselves. TerraCycle began by commercializing liquid plant food made from biological waste—the company refers to as “worm poop,” in reused soda bottles from school recycling programs, after making donations for them. Cleaning the bottles, slapping homey labels on them, and fitting them with trigger sprays other manufacturers couldn't use, or didn't want, enabled the company to repurpose packaging.

Illustrating consumer ideas like these, as well as the marketing story of brands that are implementing environmental measures on company websites, product brochures, media outlets and packaging will dovetail with emerging values in the marketplace. They will resonate with consumers.

Companies might also entertain the idea of donating a percentage of their profits to worthwhile environmental causes like American Forests. For each dollar donated, American Forests plants a tree. Food manufacturers that are seeing success with natural or organic products might support family farms and organic growers' associations as Stonyfield Farm and Annie's do.

Selling new value propositions of brands is more important than trying to advertise and sell products through as usual, especially now when the economy is making it hard to do anything as usual. Advertising that continues to push new and improved products, tries to favorably compare with competitive products, or uses price as leading value indicators is increasingly falling on deaf ears.

However, brands and products marketed in an authentic eco-conscious way enable marketers to respond to emerging culturally driven values meaningfully. Companies, large and small, can begin to reposition their brands to be in sync with the communities they are doing business in, and by doing so, to offer greater perceived value to consumers than their competitors do.

Competitors will likely respond and do the same, but there is much to be said for owning consumer value mindshare first within categories, isn't there?

Social responsibility, transparency and environmental values are resonating with consumers more and more. Companies that work toward honestly stated, specific sets of goals, without "greenwashing," will stand to profit, in every sense of the word. Owners, managers, employees, shareholders, suppliers and partners feel good about companies that have an actionable sense of purpose—and commitment.

The payoff: Consumers are increasingly attuned to supporting the brands that are perceived as doing something positive for the planet... because that's where their values are increasingly headed.

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“ Nicely put Claire. Consumers are far more aware of the issues and arriving at their own conclusions about what doing the right thing look like. Brands need to tune into that. ”
William (Bill) Smith, Founder, CEO, Ethical Brand (International) - September 22, 2008

“ Great article, Claire, and it's nice to see some companies that are taking some onus on themselves to "pre-think" recycling. I'd only further elaborate on your point that this idea is not new. Back in the late 80s, when the first wave of environmentalism took hold, the maxim was "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle". What many people didn't realize was that those verbs were supposed to be in order. I.e., only recycle once you had reduced excess consumption as much as possible. ”
Raymond Ludwin, Strategic Planner, Lowe Roche Advertising Ltd. - September 22, 2008

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