

## WASHINGTON BUSINESS JOURNAL

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# Make sure your green claims withstand scrutiny

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In the past few years, I've read on blogs, listened at shows, and heard in the media that "green is the new black," a not-so-accurate reference to black being the key to fashion success.

In business today, many professionals, from execs to middle managers, believe they need to hop on the green bandwagon for one reason — to tap into a lucrative pocket. Not everyone is solely about the green (money), but many are. But here's a word of warning: Green is not like any other vertical, space or industry you've experienced. As a matter of fact, as I've indicated in a previous column, green is not a vertical, space or industry at all. It's not a way of business — it's a way of existence. There are rules to this "green thing." So, before you head down the road of developing your next ad campaign with children running through green fields filled with solar panels and windmills, consider the items below.

Can your product or service support a realistic environmental claim?

If your answer to this question is no, stop, or be prepared to feel the wrath of environmentalists rightfully accusing you of green washing. Here is a reality check — 99.9 percent of all products have a negative impact on the environment. In truth, I can't think of a product that has a positive impact, but I left the 0.1 percent because I am hopeful that something does exist. That being said, the degree of environmental impact of a product can vary greatly.

Let's consider automobiles. At one end of the spectrum, you have hybrids such as the well-known Toyota Prius and at the other end you have large SUVs such as the Hummer. From the production, transport, and use of both these products, there are negative environmental impacts. However, because of the gas mileage of the Prius, its impact on the environment is less severe. Even though the Prius has a negative impact on the environment, it can support a credible environmental claim because its impact is much less severe than other alternatives. Us "greenies" support Prius' claim. We're certainly more cautious about Hummer's.

I realize most of you do not sell automobiles, but this example serves as a lesson. You need to understand how you stack up to the competition in terms of your environmental impact. If you are one of the leaders (in a positive way), do not be afraid to communicate that fact. If you are not, your messages will be tinted with shades of gray.

Are you willing to invest time?

Operating in a way that reduces your impact on the environment is not based on tactics or strategies. It is based on the core attributes and values of your organization. Thus, a "green" marketing strategy can take a while to pay off, and unless your values are aligned with sustainability, your organization will likely not have the patience.

If you are looking for a short-term sales spike, then you should probably look for other causes to align your brand with. People are willing to do their homework on "green" claims and will often wait to make sure companies are truly dedicated to the organization's green claims. This may take a year, two, three, or more. If you are not willing to invest this time to align your brand with the environment, you will probably not reap the rewards you are looking for.

Does your target market care?

Great marketing, whether "green" or traditional, comes down to one simple rule — be meaningful to your customers. If you are delivering a message that does not resonate with your target, "green" will not be effective.

You may have one of the greenest products on the market, but if that is not why people buy your product, then leading with that message is not the best way to build your brand. For example, consider the hybrid example again. The Prius is commonly thought of as the greenest car on the market. For other hybrids such as the Honda Civic, it is very hard to out-green the Prius and I would advise they shouldn't even try. It would be a losing battle.

While the sales of hybrids started with devout environmentalists, the true surge has really come as a result of increasing gas prices. While some people are buying hybrids for their green appeal, the majority is buying out of frugality. Focusing on the financial benefits of hybrids may be a better communication strategy than a green one.

If you did not answer yes to the questions above, attempting a "green" marketing strategy will likely cause more harm than benefit. On the other hand, if you answered yes across the board, developing a "green" marketing strategy is something to definitely consider. If done properly the results can be very green indeed.

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