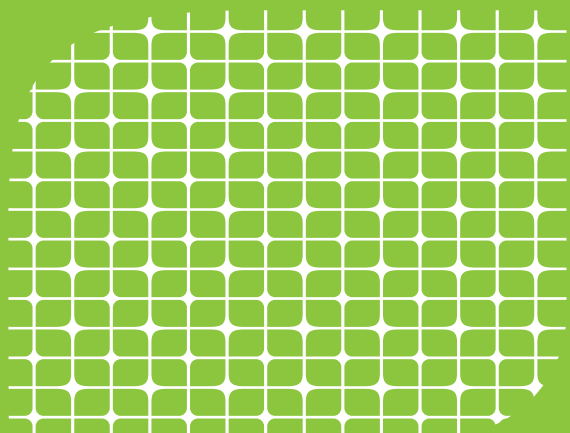


By Shaan Kirpalani



IS GREENER Grass



Advertising and marketing in a less-polarized, more eco-friendly age

The environmental movement was simpler in the 1990s. It was The Treehuggers versus Them (the shortsighted politicians, the greedy corporations and the uninformed SUV drivers of the world). Treehuggers were an elite force, armed with information and affluence, who waged campaigns of sustainability, pesticide-free produce, bike riding, carpooling and whale saving. We were the Earth's crusaders, and we rattled our hemp sabers from atop our windmills against those who meant to pave the planet with their freeways. Back then, if something was "green," it was a color, and if people were "Green," they were affiliates of a marginal political party.

Today the lines have blurred. Once-boutique homeopathic herbs and teas are available in mainstream supermarkets. Hippies, soccer moms, Boomers and X-ers are all eating the same organic, free-range chicken. Massive corporations like Toyota, with its Prius campaigns, and PG+E, with its successful Ecomagination campaign, are reaching out to consumers in a sustainable, eco-friendly embrace. It's not even clear what shade of green "Green" is anymore.

Treehugger.com caters to the darkest-Green consumers, the approximate 13 percent of Americans whose strong attitudes toward the environment are matched by their consumer behavior.

T H I N K I N G G R E E N

Thinking Green

Lucky for us, the world has experts to help answer our questions. According to Denise Wagoneer, vice president of creative research at Getty Images, "Forest Green" is the shade of green most consumers associate with the environment. This finding comes from a 2007 Getty study, which gathered 1,000 print campaigns from around the world and surveyed the reactions of visitors (3.2 million a month) to Getty's image database. The study found images of trees and forests rated highest, followed closely by images of water: oceans, rivers, waterfalls, etc. But what does Green mean to consumers? In 2007, Yankelovich Market Research Group reported consumers' most common associations with the term included recycling, energy efficiency, energy-saving light bulbs, global warming, air pollution and energy-efficient appliances.

In this new era, market-research firms call Treehuggers "Green-Thusiasts" or "LOHAS" (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability) consumers, a.k.a. "Lohasians." Environmental activism is no longer exclusive to political and ideological arenas; "consumer activists" play key roles in the \$700 trillion American marketplace. Take, for example, the current market incarnation of the term "Treehugger": Treehugger.com, an online salon where visitors get Green tech updates, share Green opinions, read Green news—and shop for Green products. It's a successful, well-run, well-marketed corporation with a founder (Graham Hill) whose résumé reads more like an innovative entrepreneur's than a tree-hugging do-gooder's. Nonetheless, Treehugger.com has discovered an opportunity to make a lot of money while doing good. So, too, did the Discovery Channel, which acquired the site for \$10 million in August 2007.

Treehugger.com caters to the darkest-Green consumers, the approximate 13 percent of Americans whose strong attitudes toward the environment are matched by their consumer behavior. These 30 million consumers offer an enticing niche to advertisers. Lohasians are well educated, have high income levels (30 percent make \$100,000 or more a year), are willing to pay a premium price for Green products and are highly informed about environmental issues. Thus, the hardest part of advertising to this group is already taken care of: the creation of "need." They see the environment as a problem that needs fixing—invaluable in a market in which the products that sell are those that solve problems.

Creating this "need" in the other 210 million consumers, however, is a challenge for the advertising industry. The Yankelovich study found that only 45 percent of all consumers believe environmental problems today are severe, and a scant 22 percent think they can make a difference when it comes to the environment. On the other hand, the market researcher Mintel International Group reports that, while the population of "True Greens"—consumers who seek out and regularly buy green products—remains small, about 68 percent of Americans can be classified as "Light Greens," consumers who buy Green sometimes. Let's just assume that we are at this tipping point everyone is talking about. How does one advertise to these consumers?

Rising Green Tide

Advertisers have to create their own demand in the market—essentially creating a problem and selling its solution. Nike is doing it in the anti-marketing of the company's newest Air Jordan shoe. The shoe boasts a “water-based bonding process, eliminating solvent cements, and an efficient pattern design to minimize waste,” among other features. The Nike Web site claims it sets a “benchmark for premium performance footwear and [Nike] is committed to designing all footwear to meet the company's baseline or higher ‘Considered’ standards by 2011; the company has set the same goal for apparel by 2015 and equipment by 2020.” This is enormous, right? So, where are the advertisements? Why isn't Nike popping up all over the place, branding itself as a Green company selling Green shoes?

Because Nike got burned doing just that when a lawsuit was brought against the company in 1998 for “making false statements and/or material omission of fact” concerning the working conditions under which its products were manufactured. Nike settled out of court in 2003 and has “generally laid low” when it comes to promoting its Green practices, according to Joel Makower of Greenbiz.com. Nike, however, didn't give up. The company just stopped talking Green and started doing Green behind the scenes. They are essentially solving the consumer problems of “need” across the entire spectrum. At one end are the non-Lohasians who need basketball shoes, and at the other are the Lohasians who need basketball shoes manufactured in a sustainable way.

A Greener Horizon

The Nike model foreshadows how advertising will be done in the future, according to Culture of Future's Jody Turner, an independent trend researcher and recent speaker at the San Francisco Green Fest, and Vikash Singh, who sells advertising at Treehugger.com. According to Singh, the advertisements that perform the best are the simplest. Ads on Treehugger.com are hip, subtle and aesthetically pleasing and invite visitors to advertisers' Web sites, which provide all the relevant details about the products and companies that make them.

This trend is becoming the standard and will, according to Turner, be a must for companies to stay competitive in the marketplace. Web sites provide online forums for consumers to find information on—and engage in chat room discussions about—just how Green a company and its products really are. It's a symbol of the initiative consumers are taking to regulate their own marketplace.

At present, the responsibility for keeping things Green appears to be in the hands of the Lohasians, but it won't be forever. As environmental problems affect more and more people—especially economically, when it comes to energy efficiency—the demographic is recruiting a reluctant membership. Eventually we will all have environmental problems that need solving. Maybe Treehuggers knew what “green” meant all along: dollars. ■ ■ ■

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Shaan Kirpalani is a contributing editor for Thrillist.com in San Francisco and was a frequent contributor to *TODOMonthly*. Kirpalani also has been published in *Vernis* in Vienna, Austria, where he lived for a year in an attempt to figure out exactly what he was going to do with his recently acquired master's degree in environmental management.