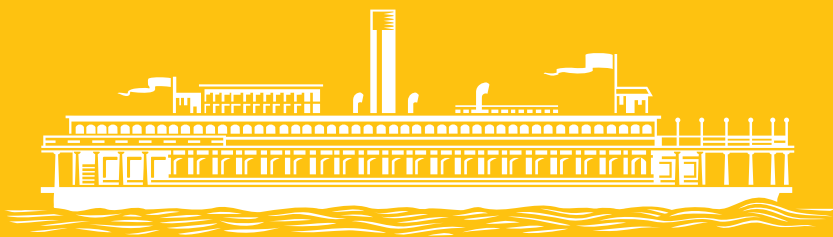


Brand against global warming
by Allen Adamson
Advertising Age
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As news of winter storms fills the airwaves and people across the nation bundle up against the plummeting temperatures, it might be hard to think about the recent devastating report on global warming.

But people are thinking. While global warming has long been a political dynamic, the intensity of the debate and the number of people involved have increased exponentially. And it's not simply as a result of those who have put "An Inconvenient Truth" on the list of Top Ten movie rentals.

Global warming has escalated as a social dynamic. It's becoming a mainstream issue driven by mainstream folks, including mainstream soccer moms who worry about the future of their children and grandchildren.

But while people fear global warming, they're not quite sure what they should do to help.

The early adopters, the "fringe-y green folks," smart and prescient as they were, looked to early-adopting brands for answers. Hybrid cars, solar

panels for roofs, and other alternative energy sources were among the products and services forward-thinking brands sold and consumers bought in response. But the issue has gone far beyond early adopters and early-adopting brands. Soon there will be millions, not thousands, of consumers looking for ways to help. And hundreds of brands will jump in to give them options.

My professional guess is that the level of branding noise and clutter vis-a-vis global warming will be almost as overwhelming as the issue itself. Consumers will be looking for cues to help them make the best choices.

While, ideally, it would be great to provide them with an evocative, universally accepted brand icon for eco-friendly brands, it's just too complicated a topic. It would be incredibly difficult to establish and apply criteria.

We're not dealing with something like a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval, which was developed with a well-defined understanding

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of sponsorship and what it represented. Even the Energy Star program, well intended as it is, is too ambiguous. Energy Star, a government-backed initiative, is a status awarded to public and private buildings and construction materials to signify energy efficiency.

My professional point of view, definitely not a guess, is that brand organizations are going to have to take on the responsibility of cutting through the branding noise and clutter on their own. This is going to be an enormous challenge given how complex yet compelling this issue has become.

With that in mind, here are four rules for any brand organization getting ready to take on the cause. (By the way, these apply to any sort of branding initiative.)

If you want your brand to make a meaningful difference to the planet, I encourage you to take note.

1. Make it simple

Communicate your premise and its promise clearly and succinctly. Consumers must be able to immediately understand how your brand is going to help them help the planet. Whatever it is your brand develops to ease the effects of global warming must prompt an "I get it!"

Tide Coldwater is a wonderful example. The name says it all: a detergent that gets your clothes Tide-clean without energy-wasting hot water. It's a perfect branding signal, as is the product's functionality, which reliably supports the promise.

2. Take a long-term view

Global warming is absolutely not about short-term promotions. It took a long time to get into this mess, and it's not going to go away with a rebate offer. Invest legitimate amounts of time and money into looking at ways your brand can make a legitimate and sustainable difference.

Concurrently, ensure that your brand idea will be as good for your business in the long term as it is for the Earth.



Method has built its line of eco-friendly cleaning products around the idea "people against dirty."

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Be realistic. You've got a business to run. Home Depot, for example, just launched an initiative tied to "Earth friendly" products. It's not a one-time deal; it's a merchandising and operational commitment that could remain in effect forever. Home Depot adopted a new way of looking at a business model.

3. Ensure your efforts align with existing brand equity

To be of value, your initiatives should be linked to what people already associate with your brand. The more logical the connection, the better. If there isn't some natural connection, don't play. For example, it makes sense for Wal-Mart to make a major commitment to promoting and selling energy-efficient light bulbs. Wal-Mart, as a brand, is associated with economies of scale. Imagine what would happen if millions of people started using these intelligent light sources.

4. Make sure it's authentic

You can't promise that your products are going to help people save the planet when your manufacturing facilities are still belching carbon emissions. As consumers become wiser to the issue, any disingenuous behavior is going to be transparent. You've got to embrace your brand initiative on all fronts.

If you don't put your money where all your fossil fuels are, it won't be a matter of *if* your brand will be the subject of negative blogging, but *when*.

The level of concern is growing, and people want to get involved. But they want to know what to do to help. Brands have always served to help people make relevant choices in their purchase decisions, and there's never been a better time or a more relevant issue than global warming to prove this point.

If you want your brand to own a tangible piece of the solution, I'd get on it now. It's going to get very crowded very quickly. Before you do, however, remember the rules. In truth, they'll make it more convenient for your brand to succeed. ■

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