



Taking Green Into The Black

FRONT-RUNNERS IN THE GREEN MOVEMENT EXPLAIN WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SELLING ECO-FRIENDLY PRODUCTS.

By Jen Alexander

Since the explosion of the eco-friendly movement just a few years ago, the call for green items in the promotional products industry is heard more loudly than ever. Several companies have jumped on the trend and are making names for themselves as organizations with green marketing thumbs.

Sure, you'd like to join the crowd—you see the obvious appeal and the potential for success, but how do you get started?

An important rule when marketing environmentally friendly products is to minimize the sacrifices your customers must make in order to purchase and distribute them, according to *Business And Sustainable Development: A Guide* from the International Institute For Sustainable Development. This means the quality and appeal must outweigh the sometimes higher cost of choosing a green promotional product.

The guide also points out that different environmental attributes are important in different categories; nevertheless, the more attributes present, the more appealing the product becomes.

The most easily recognizable attributes in green products, and ones that will encourage your current and potential buyers to choose them, come from the three environmental Rs—reduce, reuse and recycle. If a product is made from recycled materials (thus reducing the amount of raw material introduced into the manufacturing process), can be used multiple times or is recyclable in its finished state, it is more likely to be purchased and distributed.

Suppliers and promotional consultants getting great business from the green product movement have their own take on how you can get started and what you'll need to know to stay eco-savvy.

Terri Yamate, co-owner of Burbank, California-based distributor Beyond Zebra (UPIC: BZI), remembers the challenges of trying to market green promotional products to clients several years ago, before green living was a trend.

"We pitched green for years; at the time, they all said 'it's really expensive' or 'we have to order huge minimums, so it's not for us,'" recalls Yamate.

Jennifer Stanczuk points out that even suppliers hit roadblocks when trying to sell eco-friendly items, as Santa Rosa, California-based supplier Corvest Promotional Products (UPIC: PARK011) has found with some of its promotional consultants. "We occasionally find distributor clients who don't take too keenly to green products," Stanczuk says. "We've found that it's mostly for one of two

reasons: They either think green products are too expensive, or they think they're no longer popular."

Yamate says the trend has only taken off for promotional products in the past eighteen months, but now many of her mainstream clients are interested in greener items. "Eighty to 85 percent of our clientele now ask about green products," says Yamate.

Painting A Green Bullseye: Who To Target In Your Marketing And How

Yamate mentions corporate environmental or recycling programs and school groups as just two sources receptive to green products. "There's an untapped market out there," she says. "You have to be imaginative in what you do. If you're smart, you'll find a way to pitch."

To combat resistance, Yamate and co-owner Stacy Bursleson approached the environmental divisions of large corporations about using products that would reflect their message and mission. "We've worked with government agencies on a state, local and national level," Yamate says.

Corvest has waded into the deep end of the promotional products pool and is still swimming along. Its secret to marketing success? Showcase the retail appeal. "Suppliers and distributors alike should point out the popularity of green products in the retail market, as this almost always equates to success in the promotional products industry," says Stanczuk.

The myth that green equals expensive is purely that, Stanczuk says. And again, to argue the point that such items are popular, one only need look as far as a store shelf to find one, if not many, eco-friendly products.

John Borg, principal of San Francisco, California-based distributor Wishbone Creative Group/Eco Imprints (UPIC: Eco), says despite being located in "one of the greenest cities around," his company's clients are from all over the country. "It's not just environmental nonprofits and renewable energy start-ups. We are approached by all kinds of organizations, from Fortune 500 corporations to a local Girl Scout troop," says Borg. "Our clients include schools, government and corporate groups and nonprofit agencies."

Finding Greener Product Pastures

When looking for what type of items to pitch to a client, there are obvious product choices, such as bamboo shirts and recycled or recyclable plastic products—but, says Yamate, distributors and suppliers should look at both the finished items and the raw materials. Beyond the three Rs lie more options for eco-friendly promotional product marketing, sustainable and organic among them.

Sustainable items are produced with minimal impact on the environment and are made in a way that protects public and environmental health and provides social and economic benefits, according to the

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Sustainable Products Corporation, a group that helps companies provide and market sustainable products.

Apparel and woven accessories get an organic boost from raw materials grown without pesticides or synthetic fertilizers, but Yamate warns that domestic organic sources are limited and sourcing from overseas suppliers jeopardizes the organic label. She gives the example of organic crops losing their status in transit due to treatments that minimize the risk of bringing foreign crop diseases into the U.S.

Caveat Emptor: Beware Green Ignorance, Or Worse, Greenwashing

Some suppliers may not be as green as they claim to be, Yamate adds, so distributors should take it upon themselves to become educated about product claims and learn which items on the market meet general standards for environmental friendliness.

Borg says distributors of green products should be transparent with customers about the greenness of their items and get information from suppliers regarding the origins of the materials. "Don't overhype how green they are. Challenge supplier claims if they seem dubious—there are different shades of green," says Borg.

Yamate says she believes the eco-movement is about re-educating clients, which will bring more awareness of the promotional products available to them.

Yamate says green marketing is successful when companies can show that not buying green could result in a loss of business. At the same time, clients need options that fit within their budgets.

Sometimes, it pays to walk away from ill-informed clients, too. Yamate says her company has had to back out of lucrative deals because the items the client requested weren't truly eco-friendly. "We suggested a new product and a new pitch, but the client refused either option.

"It only behooves you to know what you're pitching," says Yamate. "The information is really quite easy to find, but you have to sift through what's true and what's not."

For newbies in the green-product world, Borg recommends learning about and pitching a small category of items, rather than trying to learn everything at once. Above all, "don't fake it," he says. "I've talked to some suppliers who don't know the difference between recycled and recyclable materials. Get to understand the terminology and the issues related to sustainability. Do your homework."

Stanczuk says responsibility for education falls on everyone's shoulders, from suppliers to end users, because "as inhabitants of our planet, it's our responsibility on a human level to educate ourselves on the importance of helping our environment and to research the ways we can."

Borg agrees. "If we can educate our clients and encourage them to use a larger percentage of their promotional buying power in a way that benefits both the planet and their brand, then we can make a real difference. It's a classic win-win." ■

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