

Effectively Green

Consumers are bombarded with green marketing messages and decisions daily. Something as simple as checking out at the grocery store leaves the consumer with an environmental choice: "Paper or plastic?"

By John Blount

The importance of 'green' as a marketing resource

As it turns out, the answer is not a straightforward one. Both materials have pros and cons regarding their respective environmental impact. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, the answer largely depends on where you live.

Plastic bags threaten coastal wildlife, so if you live along the coast, consequently, you should opt for paper. On the other hand, if you live in the heartland, paper has a bigger impact on land and trees, so the better environmental choice would be plastic.

A New Approach

Thankfully, the environmental choice of soft water versus hard water is a much simpler option once the consumer is informed of the environmental benefits of soft water.

A significant percentage of the U.S. residential water treatment industry is from softener sales. The market penetration estimated by some is as low as 9%. Despite this low percentage, water softeners are typically considered a mature technology.

The existing marketing approach to selling residential

water softeners is to demonstrate to the consumer both the financial cost of hard water as well as the value of soft water. All things considered, it's not a bad approach and has worked well for decades. But how many businesses still rely on methods that worked 40 years ago? Answering that question correctly can be the difference between a water softener dealership that is growing and thriving versus one that is shriveling or barely surviving.

Admittedly, in today's economy the value of a purchase is especially important. However, water softener dealers are increasingly discovering a valuable tool that can add a new dimension to sales—a phenomenon popularly referred to as "green marketing."

Green marketing, by definition, is the process of selling a product or service based on the environmental benefits it provides. Many industries have begun using this effective marketing approach, from Toyota's hybrid Prius to Clorox's new Green Works line of cleaning products.

As many early adopters of green marketing have painfully learned, this type of marketing can be challenging for even the most seasoned professional, and involves quite a bit more than slapping a "green" label on a product and learning to mutter environmental buzzwords like some sort of magical incantation.

Green marketing is not black magic, but it does require attention to the dynamics that are causing this potentially effective marketing tool to continually develop and expand. These dynamics include:

- The speed and degree of the shift in consumers incorporating environmental aspects in their buying decisions;
- The current relatively young and disorganized market;
- A market niche that is segmented, sporadic and lacks proper distribution channels compared to more conventional competing products;
- A lack of uniform standards in the market as to what truly constitutes a "green" product; and
- Purchase inconsistencies by the

consumer, who will buy a high-mileage hybrid and also purchase an SUV. This is perhaps more a symptom than an actual market factor, and it illustrates that consumers still have a long way to go before instilling environmental values in their lifestyles and buying habits in a consistent manner.

The temptation is to be discouraged by the confusion over what is effective green marketing and what is not, and to consequently wait for the rest of the market to figure it out. But why wait for the crowd to beat you to this valuable market trend? The problem of how a water softener dealer can effectively use green marketing to grow and sustain his or her business is not as difficult as one might think.

To begin with, water softener dealers can inform the consumer of the many environmental benefits of soft water. Some of these benefits are obvious to a consumer: reduced soap and cleaner usage and improved water heater efficiency. Other environmental benefits are not as obvious to a consumer, however intelligent, and have to be explained.

These benefits include the elimination or reduction of bottled water, a decrease in plumbing obsolescence and an increase in textile life. In each case, there are energy and natural resources expended to make, distribute, use and dispose of these items.

As a result of both the obvious and the not-so-obvious environmental benefits, the consumer will reduce his or her consumption of energy and resources, which in turn results in an environmental and economic benefit. The key in this aspect of green marketing is, of course, effectively communicating to the consumer. The good news is that this is perhaps a dealer's best skill. It just needs to be adjusted to include the green aspects of the product in a way that truly connects with, and taps into, the values a customer holds.

The profile of a green consumer transcends age, gender, race, socioeconomic status and geographic area. Recent environmental surveys by Cone Marketing revealed the following:

- 72% of Americans are willing to support causes by changing their behavior, including reducing their

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environmental impact;

- 70% of Americans are paying attention to what companies are doing regarding the environment;
- 85% of Americans would consider switching to different products or services because of a company's negative corporate responsibility practices; and
- 77% of Americans would not work for a company with negative corporate responsibility practices.

If one digests the significance of Cone's findings, some basic guidelines emerge for a water dealer who wants to develop an effective green marketing strategy without busting their budget.

Build Your Identity

Start with a public relations program that develops a green theme or identity for your business. Build a relationship with the local media by agreeing to participate in a story about your company's

environmental record.

An example would be that ABC Water Co. has committed to eliminating a certain amount annually of waste generated from the packaging of cleaners and bottled water from every participating household.

Once your green marketing strategy is implemented, apply for local and regional environmental awards.

Identify Target Markets

Target markets can include natural food stores, environmental tradeshows, environmental organizations and green building alliances such as the Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

Local Impact

Reinforce local benefits. Studies have shown that attitudes toward an environmental message are received better when the benefit is demonstrated at the local level; for example, a statement such as

"reduce water bottles in the local landfill" versus "reduce greenhouse gases globally."

Additionally, a dual message of value and environmental benefit will appeal to a broader consumer group. For example, soft water increases water heater efficiency, reducing energy consumption, which is good for the pocketbook and the environment.

Relevant Facts

Be precise and relevant. Make definite claims that provide quantitative impacts. For example, for the average family of four, a water softener in a hard water environment can reduce the consumption of soaps and detergents along with the packaging, reducing up to 300 lb of plastic waste in the landfill, freeing up 400 cu ft of landfill space and eliminating 50 lb of detergent chemicals per year.

Demonstrate a clear connection between the water equipment and the environment. For example, water

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softeners reduce the amount of cleaning products used, increase water heater efficiency, increase the life of appliances, eliminate or reduce bottled water use, increase clothing and textile life and increase plumbing and fixture life.

Be a Resource

Provide additional information for consumers, such as local and regional environmental data, on your website. Additionally, give environmental information on your vendor partners that consumers can easily access.

Avoid 'Greenwashing'

Greenwashing is a term used to describe the practice of companies disingenuously spinning their products and policies as environmentally friendly. Do not exaggerate the environmental benefits of the softening equipment. Choose your words carefully in your environmental message so as to not be associated with greenwashing.

The Real Deal

Be authentic. The greening of your business should be from the inside out. Do simple things such as purchasing recycled paper, putting recycle bins in your office and choosing vendors that have an internal environmental initiative. Consumers and employees can typically see through a disingenuous effort. *wqp*

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