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# 10 Things I've Learned About Engaging Consumers on Sustainability

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I've spent the last 15 or so years following what might appear to be a quixotic passion -- to engage mainstream consumers in making more sustainable choices.

As co-founder and vice president of Conservation International's Center for Environmental Leadership in Business, I had the privilege of partnering with many of the early adopters of corporate sustainability thinking, such as Starbucks and Walmart. My universal take-away: It is hard to build sustainability thinking into a mega-brand's DNA. And it is infinitely harder to help a multinational company figure out how to connect with their customers and influence behavior.

Now, as the head of environment and director of the eBay's Green Team, I realize that the conventional wisdom that it is hard to change consumer behavior might not be as true today as perhaps it once was.

Look at how consumers have changed the way they shop in the last decade. Going to the mall is being replaced with online shopping, while mobile commerce through smart phones is the new trend to watch. Tapping into these moments of change, and building sustainable thinking into them, could hold the key to affecting change at scale. But to do so, the sustainability community will have to be savvy both in spotting these inflection points as well as in connecting with consumers through them.



Here is a snapshot of lessons I've learned -- many of them the hard way -- about engaging consumers in making more sustainable choices:

## 1. Cool is More Important Than Green

For years, the environmental community has championed the benefits of acting responsibly: buying greener products, avoiding waste, and thinking about what our actions will mean for future generations. Unfortunately, for how far the green movement has come, especially recently, it's still not top-of-mind for consumers. That's why, if we really want sustainability to be mainstream, we need to lead with messages that consumers do care about – style, price, function – and let sustainability attributes be the icing, rather than the cake.

## 2. Radical Transparency = Humility

Radical transparency has my nomination for the sustainability buzz phrase of 2010. At its core, though, it's a principle fundamental to engaging with consumers: being humble. Being upfront

about the challenges you face is the most certain way to ensure your accomplishments are credible.

### **3. Accept That the Best Ideas Probably Won't Come From You**

There is so much talk about how we can use Web 2.0 technology and thinking to promote our brands and our programs and not nearly enough about what it can do for us. We have an unprecedented opportunity to peer into the hearts and minds of our customers -- all we have to do is listen.

### **4. Trade Up, Not Trade Off**

At eBay, because we have the good fortune to run a marketplace with a large volume of used products being traded in it, we've been able to start to break from the stereotype of what a 'green' product looks like. By highlighting that environmentally preferable choices -- in this case, pre-owned -- can be style-savvy and pocketbook friendly, we're able to engage with our consumers around greener choices by showing them how it adds value to their life, rather than demanding sacrifice.

### **5. Materiality Matters**

The corollary to the above -- consumers aren't naive, either. A green claim has to feel like it's in line with the core offering and impact of the product. Otherwise, it just doesn't ring true. Look at the backlash surrounding bottled water's attempt to 'go green' to see what happens when you take a fundamentally unsustainable product and layer on some green messaging.

### **6. We Need a New Lexicon**

Just about any sustainability professional will admit to feeling hamstrung by the inadequate language in our field. Words like 'green,' 'eco-friendly,' and 'ethically-sourced' have become so ubiquitous as to nearly render them meaningless. Plus, so much of our lingo focuses on just one aspect of a complex and interwoven set of issues. I know there are people much savvier than I am working on this, and I can only hope that they get there, and fast.

### **7. Don't Be a Conversation Hog**

Once a brand 'gets' the green religion, their next instinct is often to develop a traditional communications plan around it. Problem is, no one is listening these days. Engaging consumers means just that: establishing an open, two-way, ongoing dialogue. It's much harder than issuing a press release, but way more effective.

### **8. Peer Pressure Can Do What You Can't**

The influence of 'word of mouth' has never been more relevant than in today's world of online social networks and increased cynicism towards traditional marketing. Invest the time in converting true believers which, as in eBay's case, might first be your own employees, and watch the network effect take off. Social media has only begun to be tapped as a powerful agent for social change; there's definitely more to come.

### **9. Question What Business You're Really In**

How much of Starbucks' success is due to how they see their corporate mission, "to inspire and nurture the human spirit," rather than just providing a good cup of coffee? Ford Motor Company CEO Bill Ford now talks about being a transportation business rather than a car manufacturer. Visionary. And just in time, given the rise of models like ZipCar, it's one of many examples of transitioning a business model from product to service. The dematerialization and digitization of goods -- think iTunes -- is another trend to watch for, and to cheer on.

## **10. There's a Small Window With Big Opportunity**

Consumer research everywhere shows a marked shift in consumer attitudes, no doubt affected by the state of the global economy. Value and values are top of mind. More than anything, people want to feel like they are making smart choices with their limited budgets and securing against an uncertain future. In this, there is infinite opportunity to shift consumption patterns but only through swift, smart action on the part of leading brands to meet the longing that people today have for lives with more meaning, and less useless stuff.

Smart businesses will see that they can gain greater share of wallets with such efforts, and the race is on to see which can create and defend deep relationships with their consumers by bringing the concept of a more sustainable lifestyle out of utopia and into reality.

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