



Colorblind

Understanding How Consumers Think About the Environment

“We’ve already started doing the smaller things. I’ve changed out all our light bulbs and purchased canvas bags for grocery shopping. We’re trying to combine all of our small errands into one trip and we are carpooling to work. I purchase energy efficient products and recycled products. I know it’s not enough but we keep building on these things. But I sincerely agree with those who have already said there is no one important item. We all have to continue doing more and teaching our children how to live with our environment.”

*A typical respondent in the Continuum/
Communispace research study*

Increasingly, Green issues are influencing purchase decisions. For many companies this demands that their entire product lifecycle be reexamined, including design, development, manufacturing, delivery, use, and disposal. Is there a “better” way to produce and sell a “Greener” product? Given that solid information about what makes something “earth-friendly” is hard to find, what does “better” really mean?

From industry to industry, the definition of “better” takes interesting forms. Consider a hotel chain trying to acknowledge Green issues in their services. Some have implemented opt-in towel reuse programs: If you want a new towel tomorrow, just leave the old one on the floor after you shower. If you don’t mind reusing the towel, just hang it up on the towel bar. Everyone wins, it seems: patrons who want fresh towels can have them; patrons concerned about wasting energy can reuse; and the hotel saves energy and money when patrons participate in the program.

And if nobody participates, things are no worse than they are now. But research we conducted in an effort to understand Green behaviors found that opt-in towel reuse wasn’t a clear-cut win. When one high-end hotel chain asked a community of its patrons about the issue, their answers revealed a wide split. “Of course we should re-use!” to “I’m paying for a luxury hotel room and I don’t want to be made to feel bad for wanting a fresh towel every day!” Does the pro-reuse crowd behavior offset the behavior of the anti-reuse patrons? How do the energy and money saved compare to the cost of acquiring new patrons to replace those that get angry enough to stay elsewhere next time?

The public’s interest in all things Green does not necessarily translate into clear direction for businesses, manufacturers and service providers. In fact, a misstep can result in accusations of “Greenwashing”. For example using environment-friendly language on a package to cover environment-unfriendly ingredients or practices. The public’s ability to interpret corporate intent is mixed. Is reducing the amount of plastic in bottled water packaging a good thing? Or is that earth-friendly move clouded by the whole concept of bottled water? Continuum wanted to know.

As an innovation consultancy working with a global client base, Continuum advises companies on design and business issues. Understanding what it means to “Go Green” is crucial for our clients, and the nuances involved are complex. There are more questions than obvious answers.



So we set out to ask the question, “How do we talk to people about Green?” Then we set out to find the answer. Or to understand if there even was an answer. A team from Continuum spent several months with consumers across the country, asking about the environment, consumption, and the future. The results provided insight into how people think and more importantly, helped inform ways to think about Green when developing products and services.

Simultaneously, we worked with Communispace, a pioneering company that develops focused, highly interactive online communities for some of the world’s largest corporations. The green issue, and our approach to it, encouraged more than 35 of those corporations to share the keys to their discussion groups with us. We talked to 6500 people, across 40 virtual communities, about Green decision-making and many other issues. The results have helped us put real depth behind the simple statement that consumers have a “complicated” relationship with these issues.

And finally, we plunged in and made the Green issue a part of every project we do. A team of Green thought leaders meet with every project manager to look for sustainable opportunities. This is not always a client ask, but a value we provide so our clients are aware of the green options available. These efforts enable us to help clients understand how Green issues affect the entire design process – from the design of products, services, and environments to marketing plans, communication strategies and corporate branding.

So, the big question: what does Green mean to a consumer? There’s no right answer, of course, but there are several ways to think about how consumers make choices in regards to sustainability, recycling and product lifecycle. And choice is the key. Consumer’s purchase decisions depend upon many factors. Green issues add to the knowledge and opinions that affect the decisions and may swing the balance one way or the other.

Or, they may not affect the purchase decision at all. One major finding of our work with consumers is that unlike price or brand, “good for the environment” is not a stand-alone factor in deciding whether or not to buy a product. The environment may be a tipping factor or it may be used as a justification. But a “this product is better for the environment” label, by itself, will not get a consumer to rethink a purchase decision.

We know consumers tend to make purchases based on criteria both rational and emotional. Green messaging with a broad focus tends to appeal to the emotional side, as in, “Pick this because it is better for the planet.” However, if the consumer is making a decision based on narrow and rational reasons, the Green appeal often isn’t a factor. The opportunity lies in creating environmental messages that connect along more than big-thinking, emotional lines.

For example, while we may all know that recycling saves trees and cuts down on landfill, it becomes an easier, more motivated behavior if your community institutes “pay as you throw” waste management. This scheme rewards you for throwing out less, hitting citizens softly in the wallet. It’s an obvious way to turn a public issue into a personal issue.



Another factor in Green impact is the consumer's understanding of the product's lifecycle. We identified three types of Green impact for every product. First is "origin impact". Where does the product come from? Food is a good example of something with large "origin impact" considerations. Terms like "organic", "not treated with hormones" and "free range" all speak to the origin of the product. The second type of impact, "use impact", refers to the ways a product affects the environment during operation. Cars and air conditioners are good examples of high "use impact" products. And finally, "disposal impact" refers to what happens to a product once discarded. Good examples include consumer electronics, packaging, newspapers, and anything else for which the environmental consequences are related to how they're removed from service and destroyed.

Unfortunately, a consumer may not have a solid understanding of how a product really affects the environment. For instance, once a refrigerator gets old enough, discarding it and replacing it with a new, energy-efficient model is better for the environment than keeping the old one. The savings in energy production outweigh the costs of putting a perfectly functional, but old, fridge in a landfill. But American consumers, raised on that TV commercial featuring a Native-American with a tear on his cheek, are much more attuned to ideas of littering and waste than the efficiencies of electricity production. Even in cases where a manufacturer wants consumers to do "the right thing", a product's message may have to be manipulated to play into the market's understanding of what's environmentally right.

And yet another consideration is timing. When is a consumer willing to hear about Green issues? Too early in the process can turn a purchaser off, but delaying too long can miss the chance to influence the decision. As with any other message, a product or service's environmental communications must be carefully targeted to the right consumer at the right time.

Environmental considerations are playing a growing part in the conversations between a product and service providers and their consumers. The varying levels of consumer understanding, shifting market forces, and evolving manufacturing requirements are forcing companies to expand their view of what "design" means to include considerations beyond the functional and the aesthetic. Design has always been about aligning the offering with a consumer's wants and needs. Environmental concerns add more dimensions to that alignment.

{see the following page for quotes from participants in Continuum/Communispace's research study}



“So it’s funny, we use cloth diapers for our boys but not because of the landfill piling up with diapers but for the tons of money not spent on disposable diapers. You’d think I could claim environmental reasons, but I’d be fibbing!”

“If something doesn’t work, we go buy a new one and don’t repair what is broken. We always have to have new and better things. Material goods require energy for generation and transport. That which we don’t use ends up in the landfill. Reuse is truly the best form of recycling.”

“The only time I am particularly cognizant of environmental factors is when I see a person driving down the road in an older car that is creating tons of smog on the road or when I see my roommate has left her lights on in her room while she is out or when she throws paper and bottles in the trash vs. in the recycling bin...”

“The study shows that it is more eco-efficient to replace an old refrigerator having a high electricity consumption by a new model of energy efficiency class A. The essential factor influencing the environmental impact is the electricity consumption during household use. The manufacturing phase from the gaining of raw materials to the end-installation as well as waste-disposal is not without importance, but it doesn’t have the main part of the environmental impact.”

findings of a 2002 joint BASF/German Green Party study

“I see and hear lots of companies ‘going Green’ and ‘getting on the bandwagon’ but I think there are lots of statistics. I heard this quote before ‘you can make a statistic show what you like’. I think that most are shock tactics and I question the integrity behind most statements, is it about awareness of the issue? Or awareness of their own brands?”