

The Eco-Sell

By Kate Lunau

October 7, 2009

In August, the B.C. chapter of the American Marketing Association announced its 2009 Marketer of the Year. The award didn't go to a car company, restaurant or a bank—it went to B.C. Hydro, the province's public utility. B.C. Hydro won for a series of television spots advertising its Power Smart campaign, which asks B.C. residents to cut their energy consumption by 10 per cent. The commercials offer simple solutions: turning off a light, for example, or unplugging cellphone chargers when not in use. Largely thanks to those ads, 34,000 people joined the Power Smart program in 2008, a jump of 273 per cent from the previous year.

Old habits die hard, and change isn't easy, but that doesn't make it impossible. Just as past public service campaigns have hammered home important messages—stop smoking, don't drink and drive—advertisers are now working to convince people to make environmentally sustainable choices, even if they're more time consuming, or expensive. "It's human nature to take the path of least resistance and lowest cost," says ad critic Bob Garfield. Yet campaigns like the one from B.C. Hydro show that, if it's done right, green marketing can spur real change. For businesses involved, it can generate profits, too.

Tough economic times, contrary to popular wisdom, have not led Canadians to

abandon the environment. In an August Harris/Decima poll, over 70 per cent said environmental consciousness has become more important to them over the past few years (only two per cent said it was less so). In spite of the recession, 73 per cent said they were making more of an effort to be more environmentally conscious this year than last.

And they aren't your stereotypical tree-hugging hippies. In a 2008 study of how concern for the environment affects purchasing decisions, Toronto-based ad agency Bensimon Byrne found that income, education, child status, and age didn't factor in, although so-called "strong environmentalists"—those very likely to make buying decisions to help the environment, even if it costs more—were more likely to be women, and to live in Quebec.

Hank Stewart, vice-president of strategy at the New York-based environmental ad agency Green Team, calls this burgeoning group "the awakening consumer." He credits their emergence to the Internet, which has "brought about the age of corporate transparency and empowered consumers," he says. "They can now know what a brand really stands for." Awakening consumers are well-informed, educated, and influential—they blog their opinions, and they "vote with their wallets," according to Stewart.

Green marketing is a powerful way to target Generation Y, a group born between 1980 and 1994 that, in North America, is 80-million strong, according to a new report from the Conference Board of Canada titled "Turning Green Into Gold: Green Marketing for Profit." They've grown up paying a premium for their most coveted products, and the environment is one of their favourite topics; they're not afraid to pay more for green-conscious brands. Gen Y-ers are acutely aware of "the threats of pollution, extinction, and global warming," the Conference Board report notes. They'll reward companies that reach them with dollars and word of mouth, the report says, and "punish" those that don't.

But Gen Y-ers are a cynical bunch. Raised in a media-rich environment, they are tough to win over. Perhaps that explains why non-traditional advertising has proven so successful with them. Take the Earthkeeper campaign from Timberland boots, which is mentioned in the report: launched in 2008, it aimed to "recruit one million people to become part of an online network," to create a global movement and inspire change. Facebook users could download an application to grow a "virtual tree," and for each tree "grown," Timberland pledged to plant a real one in a desert in northern China. Facebookers grew 893,000 trees; thousands of Timberland's online fans banded together to plant even more trees on their own.

Another marketing technique that's proven successful, according to the Conference Board, is positioning a top-level executive as an "environmental visionary." One obvious example is Galen Weston Jr., whose first ad campaign for Loblaws promoted the company's reusable shopping bags, or Ray Anderson, founder of carpet manufacturer

Interface, who spends a lot of his time giving speeches about how his company went green.

According to Bensimon Byrne, tying products to specific environmental concerns is also a proven green marketing tactic. Oddly enough, the agency's report found that some of the most high-profile challenges—like global warming and climate change—actually rank lower on Canadians' personal list of worries than, say, concerns about water, air quality, and garbage. ("Keeping our fresh water clean" ranked number one in their survey.) The agency helped develop a campaign for Hyundai Canada that saw it become the first to offer a top-up to Ottawa's version of the cash-for-clunkers program. "Consumers understand that air quality is important, because we breathe it," says Bensimon Byrne's Jack Bensimon. "So here's something tangible we can do to make a difference."

Tailoring the message to the current economic situation helps. In a survey of over 100 green print ads, U.S.-based environmental communications firm the SOAP Group found that the word "green" is no longer the most popular term in environmental advertising—now, it's the word "less." Environmentally friendly products are still seen as more expensive than their counterparts, yet two-thirds of Canadians don't understand why they should be. This creates a real opportunity, says Bensimon, for green products "able or willing to price against the conventional." Those that let consumers save money while helping the environment—like fuel-efficient appliances, for example, or cold-water laundry detergent—are ideal.

Of course, there are some common pitfalls many green marketers can make. The

“biggest mistake,” Bob Garfield says, is “greenwashing”—stretching the truth of environmental claims—which will lose consumers’ faith altogether. Earlier this year, Ottawa-based environmental marketing firm TerraChoice published a survey of 2,219 products in the U.S. and Canada that make green claims. It concluded that over 98 per cent of these were guilty of some kind of greenwashing, from being too vague (promising that a product is “all natural,” for example), to offering no proof of their claims. Cosmetics, cleaning supplies, and products aimed at kids were the most likely candidates for greenwashing.

Green marketers also must consider the tenor of their ads. Since almost everyone accepts that the environment is of concern, fear-based messages are pointless: “You don’t need to show polar bears stranded on ice floes,” Bensimon says. “People are very aware we’re cooking the planet.” Having a light touch is key; consumers respond to humour (like the B.C. Hydro campaign) or a sense of community (think of David Suzuki’s ads for powerWISE in Ontario, which show everyone on the same street screwing in energy-efficient porch lights).

Patty Jones is the group account director for DDB Canada in Vancouver, which crafted the B.C. Hydro ads. Above all, she says, green advertising is about presenting people with small, manageable steps they can achieve to go green. “We’re not asking everyone to retrofit their house,” she says. “We’re saying, ‘Dip your toe in the water and let’s get started.’ It’s everybody’s planet, and everyone has a stake in it. Do the right thing, and we’ll all be here cheering you on.”