

Environmental Perspectives

Social Responsibility and Marketing

What is Sustainability?

Packaging and the Triple Bottom Line

Recently there has been great emphasis on the issue of sustainability. Every newspaper, magazine and television network has produced stories on sustainability and the environmental movement. Topics such as the greening of America and the green-washing corporations have filled the headlines.

While the initial reaction of most individuals may be that sustainability is about global warming or the purchase of carbon credits, added perspective sheds light on the greater concerns of a much more complex issue. It is much bigger than just recycling or using environmentally friendly materials. "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."¹

Simply put, sustainability is about life and maintaining existence.

There are three tenants of the sustainability issue and the triple bottom line accounting measure—people, planet and profit. Each of these has an equal stake in the balance of sustainability. Much like the three legs of a stool, balance will be tipped without the equal support of each.

History has shown how balance can be disrupted by emphasis on just one of these perspectives. Many of the most recognized environmental disasters have been caused or influenced by uncontrolled business interests. On the other hand, radical environmental groups have resorted to sabotage and violence to promote their causes, often destroying businesses and prosperity in the process. Still other groups have conflicting and often confusing agendas.

A commitment to corporate social responsibility is more than just supporting environmental causes. It maintains a balance between the needs of the environment, society and the profit of business.



It is conservative, thoughtful and rewarding. A commitment to corporate social responsibility is sustainable.

Aside from the purely protective nature of packaging, there are a number of issues that challenge successful consumer packaging initiatives. Increasingly, consumer packaging is called upon to deliver a heightened list of marketing messages and product benefits to the consumer. Packaging initiatives must balance the need for impactful communication with the cost and sustainability of the types and amounts of materials used in the manufacture of goods. These trends will only increase as traditional advertising and marketing methods become more and more fragmented.

While there is no single answer to sustainability packaging, there are some retailers, marketers, manufacturers and brandowners raising the bar. A sustainable package should not be judged solely on the materials chosen, but on the greater life cycle of the package.

H. Lee Scott, CEO of Wal-Mart has said, "packaging is where consumers and suppliers come together and can have a real impact on both business efficiency and environmental stewardship. Even small changes to packaging have a significant ripple effect. Improved packaging means less waste, fewer materials used, and savings on transportation, manufacturing, shipping and storage."²

The three principles of sustainable packaging are reduce, reuse, and recycle.

As designers, we are called upon to make many choices with regard to packaging methods and materials. A reduction of these materials may have a tremendous impact on the overall lifecycle of a product's packaging. Right-sizing a package can lower material and transportation costs of a product, as well create an avenue for more efficient warehousing and shelving. While the ability to reuse packaging materials may be easier within the distribution chain, consumers can reuse packages for other purposes. Many jars and containers may be used for food or household storage, thus extending their lifecycle and usage. The recycling efforts of many communities and retailers have most certainly created a positive impact on the lifecycle of materials. Individuals may also get involved by making educated choices with the materials they consume.

In each case, we as designers and marketers must use our abilities, to communicate the best method for the consumer and sometimes the retailer to reduce, reuse and recycle.

Sources:

1. Our Common Future, Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987.
2. H. Lee Scott, CEO of Wal-Mart, 2006

