Branding Green: A Necessity rather than a USP

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Abstract

Branding is all about associations and indulgence. And, if it also matches with the ideas that are predominant in media and general surroundings and hence the 'in-thing' in society, will it gain or loose from the association? Being green or seen as green, is one the predominant theme these days. Thus, if branding is all about association and gratification, brand association with green will not only add to feeling of meeting social responsibility but in various other forms of decision for next purchase or before purchase-word of mouth or after purchase-word of mouth for going with the in-thing in the society. The 'in-thing' also caters to the being progressive, which relates well with the concept of aspirational nature of branding. But are consumers ready to pay more for green brands? No. it is the last thing in the list and is limited to feel good only. But people are aware about green issues. Thus green branding is currently limited to one of thing rather than a USP. Non-Green is clearly a disadvantage.

Keywords: Branding, Green, Sustainability, Communication, Media

INTRODUCTION

Green is not limited to name of a colour only. Semantics of 'Green' have changed. Now a day, it is talked more about for sustainability, its newer meaning. Green in this context, which owes its origin to Green House Gasses (GHG), today represents for all sustainability related issues. While GHG may be limited to global warming, most of the people also take other related issues like saving water, lesser use of plastic, using lesser energy, etc. to becoming green or meeting their commitment as a responsible citizen.

We are living in a consumer's world. But this consumer is not a consumer only. He is a social animal, with all relationships and self-social identity. As a social animal, he wants to be a socially responsible citizen or at least want to be perceived as socially responsible one. Now among other things, if he wants to be a socially responsible consumer also, what entails to be a socially responsible citizen? It could be anything from fair wages to child labour, tax paid commodities and also buying green products. If a consumer is aware of all these issues, and he has to purchase something, which one he will go for.

Let's take a very simple example. Suppose he zeros down to two products, which are similar in all respects, including price and after sales service, but 'A' is promoting it as a

green product, while B is not promoting it as a green product. It may be the case that both the products are equally green, but because, one is promoting it as a green, that product is catering to more number of gratification domains. Thus this will get the purse opened. This is because, this product 'A' is not only helping the buyer with tangible product but meeting a number of emotional needs also. But this is an ideal situation. Generally we do not get such homogenous offerings in the market. Thus does green market make a difference and also how it behaves in Indian scenario? What are brands doing and how are consumers reacting to it? This study is to understand consumer behaviour with the help of primary data.

"Green product" and "environmental product" are used commonly to describe those that strive to protect or enhance the natural environment by conserving energy and/or resources and reducing or eliminating use of toxic agents, pollution, and waste. (J. Ottman, 1997).

Lead-acid batteries are considered as toxic waste. A leading brand of such batteries launched a campaign calling as green batteries and was offering discount on return of used batteries. All leading electric appliances manufacturers now offer BEE (Bureau of Energy Efficiency) star rating on their products.

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GREEN BRAND COMMUNICATION & CATHARSIS

When consumers are convinced of the desirable “non-green” benefits of environmental products, they are more inclined to adopt them. (Jacquelyn A. Ottman, 2006). But when the other brands are also offering green features, the advantage is gone. Moreover, it is not possible for consumers to measure green-ability of a product.

As the saying goes, Media is the mirror of the society. It helps people to understand happenings in their environment. This environment could be immediate environment or happenings around the world. This report in mass media about events and concerns makes general social understanding about the issue. As there are lot of reports about sustainability and going green, it becomes a concern for individuals also.

Now this input will trace down the steps as suggested by the hierarchy of effects model of Lavidge and Steiner (1961). Steps in this hierarchy are from being Unaware to Awareness, Knowledge, Liking, Preference, Conviction and Purchase at the end. First exposure helps to develop cognition. Further it goes on to greater comprehension and then we could expect action. Hierarchy of effects is an advancement of a basic communication model, known as AIDA (attention-interest-desire-action) and is attributed in the marketing and advertising literature to Strong (1925). Sheldon (1911) included 'permanent satisfaction' as a fifth step to make it AIDAS.

One can find people at different steps of this hierarchy depending upon interest and exposure. Thus if we are communicating on going green and want people to buy products that follow sustainable practices or their usage will lead to becoming green, we find response that corresponds to different stages of the hierarchy model. Parallels are found in studies on response to communicating on sustainability (Centre for Enterprise and Economic Development Research, 2009). An empirical study points that people are at different stages and can be categorized as (Clegg, 2007, p. 213):

- Uninformed/ unaware of this issue
- Informed but do not know about importance and urgency
- Informed about importance but not urgency
- Informed about urgency also but do not know how to do or have no info or approach to utilities of sustainable lifestyle
- Informed about urgency also but doing convenient

disposal of responsibility (fad): there people who feel that to be known as people practising sustainability is in fashion. To make a mark as such a person is necessary.

- Intent to help environment as and when opportunity comes: Many times, even concerned people have to use means unfriendly to environment only because there is no other option available. Majority of them feel that they are following sustainable lifestyle but are not doing something.
- Die hard environmentalist

A DEFRA study (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 2008) categorises public into seven clusters on their appreciation of the threat of climate change and their willingness to respond to the level of their day-to-day lives which more or less corresponds to categories mentioned above. This study suggests that awareness level and conviction increased when an audience was informed about climate change and sustainable lifestyle through a workshop (Giddens, 2009, p. 105). Thus in green branding, greater interaction, like a workshop, may help generate more awareness and hence branding.

If a green consumer exists, we need to define a “green consumer.” Not everything is green and not equally green either. Roper ASW's most recent research segments American consumers by their propensity to purchase environmentally sensitive products into five categories, ranging from “True Blue Greens,” who are most inclined to seek out and buy green on a regular basis (representing 9 percent of the population), to “Basic Browns,” who are the least involved group and believe environmental indifference is mainstream (representing 33 percent of the population) (Roper ASW, 2002). The report finds that the top reasons consumers do not buy green products included beliefs that they require sacrifices, inconvenience, higher costs, and lower performance, without significant environmental benefits.

Even though people know about importance of sustainability, when they get opportunity to practice it, they either forget or postpone. This needs either a constant reminder to make progress taking the individual from cognition to conviction and then realizing the conviction (and intent) to be environmentally conscious or limited to projecting to be so.

In 1960, Harvard business professor Theodore Levitt introduced the concept of “marketing myopia” in a now-famous and influential article in the Harvard Business Review (T. Levitt, 1960). This concept suggested us to focus

on 'meeting customer needs and not focusing on 'product features'. In India also Thomson TV, multi picture in picture TV was tried to be positioned as multi feature TV with the tag line, 'something only money can buy'. But this particular proposition and campaign was a big failure. This draws relevance from the concept of Marketing Myopia. Thus if we are adding green features to product and not relating them well with direct consumer advantage, it is of little use.

Green marketing must satisfy two objectives: improved environmental quality and customer satisfaction. Misjudging either or overemphasizing the former at the expense of the latter can be termed 'green marketing myopia.' (Jacquelyn A. Ottman, 2006). So for not falling prey to this myopic situation, one must look at the balance between the two.

Rogers (1964) clearly defines several intrinsic characteristics of innovations influence an individual's decision to adopt or reject an innovation (here, sustainable lifestyle). These are

- Relative advantage or how improved an innovation is over the previous generation (current practice)
- Compatibility, i.e., the level of compatibility that an innovation has to be assimilated into an individual's life
- Complexity of using an innovation also tells whether it would be adopted by an individual
- Trialability, determines how easily an innovation may be experimented with as it is being adopted
- Observability or the extent to which an innovation is visible to others to drive communication among the individual's peers and personal networks to create more positive or negative reactions

Thus green branding must look into all these aspects also.

The vast majority of consumers, however, will ask, "If I use 'green' products, what's in it for me?" To avoid green marketing myopia, marketers must fulfill consumer needs and interests beyond what is good for the environment. (Jacquelyn A. Ottman, June 2006)

In practice, green appeals are not likely to attract mainstream consumers unless they offer a desirable benefit, such as cost-savings or improved product performance. (K. Alston, n.d.)

Alternatively, however, some marketers view green consumers as falling into three broad segments concerned with preserving the planet, health consequences of environmental problems, and animal welfare (Jacquelyn A. Ottman, June 2006). Because environmental concerns are varied, ranging from resource/energy conservation to wildlife protection to air quality, marketing research suggests that responses to green advertising appeals vary by

consumer segments. For example, in one study, young college-educated students were found to be drawn to health-oriented green appeals, whereas working adults were more responsive toward health, waste, and energy appeals (M. R. Stafford, 1996). One of the lessons from the study presented here is that green products must be positioned on the consumer value sought by targeted consumers and not on features that a product has.

DISCUSSION

Increasing number of brand managers are trying to present their brands as green brands. This is because when there is awareness among consumers to go green and there is word of mouth happening around it, why not ride on it. It is not possible to understand benefit of promoting a product as green, explicitly, but if it is the in-thing, can you escape it? If yes, then for how long. If your competitor is promoting his brand as green, will you not like to counter it?

Thus we can say, it is fast becoming essential for leading brands in non-niche (mass) product categories to be doing something to be called green. Those not doing may explore this option and reap benefits. This could be used in various ways.

Successful green products have avoided green marketing myopia by following three important principles: "The Three Cs" of consumer value positioning, calibration of consumer knowledge, and credibility of product claims. (Jacquelyn A. Ottman, 2006)

The market growth of organic foods and energy-efficient appliances is because consumers desire their perceived safety and money savings, respectively. (J. M. Ginsberg 2004). Thus talking about benefits at the user end is essential.

To know, how consumers react to green brand, green branding efforts and associations, a survey was done. A questionnaire was administered on 109 respondents.

Findings are as follows :-

- When asked to define green brand, most of them had their own definitions. Some common occurrences were, 'it is less hurting to environment', 'it consumes lesser power' or 'it is recyclable'.
- On asking as to what makes them pro towards green products, people said that they want to contribute to the society.
- When asked to name one green brand that they have purchased, very few could name one.

- On asking if they have talked to someone about green products, almost all of them have talked about it with family members as well as at least one friend. Many who have not bought that green brand, but have decided to buy in future also talk to other people about the product, sharing experiences of others.
- In response to question on what motivates them to have a preference for buying a green product, 72% people said that it was their own call and quoted news reports for their understanding. Very few (7%) said that they decided in favour of a product because of someone suggesting them about the greenness of the product. Rest had other reasons.
- On asking, how much percent they would like to pay extra to buy a green product, rest of the features remaining same, average of percentage was 3%. But none of them was ready to have reduced functionality or reduced after sales service in lieu of a greener product.
- If we look at demographic divide, people who are more concerned about the green brand, have higher income and education level. They are more sensitive, more organized and self driven. Those who have adopted sustainable practices in their lifestyle are typically younger in age, have a higher social status, have more financial lucidity, advanced education, and are more socially forward (Rogers 1962, p. 185).
- When asked about if they know anyone who is also concerned about brands going green, average of known person was 0.7 per person. On asking if someone they know also has that green brand, prior to them acquiring it or deciding for purchasing it, 94% said that they do not know anyone who has that before them. 12% people know at least one person who bought it after them but on the matter of them influencing this purchase, direct claim were very few but subjective answer showed efforts to get the credit.
- Green brands show greenness by soft design and green colour. It is a must. Otherwise, the claim does not stand good in 73% of cases.
- There was divided opinion on authenticity of claims by various brands about greenness of products. But overall green brands are considered as more responsible.

These reports indicate that there is a concern but is limited to the level of concern only and after ensuring availability of all desired features, if a product is a green brand, it is better. This relates well with emotional cleansing effect or catharsis, that one generally find in media studies. In mass media it is referred as the relieving effect that one gets after getting some communication input by which the receiver of

communication is living an experience (being engrossed in the communication) and thus feeling relieved without any practical requirements or obligations.

CONCLUSION

Small efforts serve as a good example to follow, but are statistically insignificant. For example of Zero energy home in US may become a point of discussion but in a country that contributes more than 20% of the global CO₂ emission, this is inconsequential. On the other hand, the person who would read it or others with whom he would share this news with, they may feel that something is happening and would become a reality soon (optimism). Statistical insignificance may not be known to these people. Media projects false impression of risk to the public (Giddens, 2009, p 33). So one such good news is considered as a big relief and hence a false effect again. In mass media studies, this effect is known as catharsis effect.

At individual level, little act of sustainability makes them feel that they are following sustainable lifestyle. This prevents people from sensing the urgency that this issue needs. This makes them loose focus of the real issue. A reality check is required at individual level and brand communicators and designers have this task of making sustainable lifestyle a more comprehensive act rather touching on the tip of the iceberg.

This gets compounded by attention fatigue when media reports on environment again and again. People feel that if the situation is so bad and going worse. People say that if it is so bad, just stop worrying about it (Giddens, 2009, p 34).

In light of all this, being green brand is not an advantage these days. It is a necessity now, that too in terms of direct utility for consumers, overcoming the myopic situation. Whatever euphoria is there in the market or in the minds of the consumer about green branding, it is limited to feeling good only. When it comes to take action, this concern takes a backseat for almost all consumers in general. Thus the concern is largely getting addressed as one off thing only.

Outcome of this paper are useful to brand managers and academicians. Purpose is to not lose out on getting perceived as a green brand. At the same time, going an extra mile on doing green associations for brand may not yield proportionate response.

Further research may be on what people talk to each other about greenness for brands and their relative pricing. Research could also be done on other social cost and how

carbon credit cost added pricing will be perceived.

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