

Executive Strategy: What's sustainability got to do with it?

by Kevin Sweeney - 8.3.07

Political leaders understand the value of message discipline. They know brilliant political campaigns are really about just one thing, and that a campaign's brilliance lies in its ability to project a singular message. All of the candidate's policies and individual statements can be nested within that overall message.

In the current presidential race, we can easily discern the images they project. Barack Obama is about hope and optimism, Hillary Clinton is the reasoned voice of experience, John McCain is a walking independent streak, and Mitt Romney is executive competence. They do this because American politics is a cluttered, noisy and confusing town meeting. Because it is a challenge to be heard, striking the same note repeatedly offers the best chance at breaking through.



So it is in business: The marketplace is cluttered, noisy and confusing. Brand managers do their best work when their company projects a singular image. Apple (Nasdaq: AAPL) is all about an inventive and elegant independence; it lets me have my music, my way, all in a sleek, status-infused package. Gap (NYSE: GPS) is straightforward and confident; its stores and ad campaigns mirror the simplicity and directness of its product designs.

The same principle tells us sustainability efforts can best bolster a company's market presence if publicized examples are nested within the company's overall brand message. Quite often, however, sustainability stories bear little resemblance to a company's marketing efforts. It is an opportunity lost.

Nike (NYSE: NKE) is the world's largest consumer of organic cotton. It may be surprising news, but consumers are unlikely to hear about it, at least from Nike. The company has generally been understated about its environmental accomplishments. But even if Nike began taking a more public stance, one could argue that organic cotton may not be something it should highlight. The reason: Organic cotton evokes soft images of ladybugs and butterflies, not quite what we expect from Nike. It is acoustic guitar to Nike's hip-hop. It is so far from the company's image sweet spot that even a positive news story about Nike and organic cotton could detract from the company's overall message.

So what can Nike do? It can highlight the environmental stories that reinforce its brand message of innovation on behalf of the athlete. Recycling old shoes and turning them into sports surfaces, including football fields and running tracks, is an obvious example. Its work to eliminate carcinogens in shoe rubber processing highlights a commitment to innovation. In the organic cotton arena, Nike's work with Organic Exchange, a group trying to reinvent the cotton industry, contains elements of the ideal Nike story: It is inventive, ambitious and transformational. When the company chooses to highlight its green steps, it can easily find ways to reinforce the overall brand stories.

Patagonia offers another example. The company's catalog, Web site and paid media all

project an image of top quality. They imply the reason for that quality: Customers use Patagonia products in such extreme conditions that their lives might be in the balance. The product photos, store designs and Web copy employ different tactics, but the message is the same. Patagonia has a public campaign, worth tens of millions of dollars, all focused on quality products and experiences.

Patagonia also benefits from media coverage of its environmental and social benefits. This coverage adds up to the equivalent of another major public campaign, also worth tens of millions of dollars — but this one is focused on progressive business tactics. It's not bad news that the company has two strong messaging campaigns, but it's also not optimal. The company might benefit more if the two stories were somehow merged.

At times, Patagonia has embraced the challenge by using a quality framework to describe its progressive tactics. "A commitment to quality must be holistic," is how Patagonia once framed a discussion about its famed childcare center and parental benefits. "You can't make the best-quality products without the best-quality work environment." The social story reinforces the company's message to consumers. One large, unified campaign is more effective than two small, disparate campaigns.

When Toyota introduced the Prius — before 9/11 and \$3.50-per-gallon gas — the company didn't focus its marketing efforts on the car's environmental attributes. Instead, it stressed its innovative technology. It was a much better fit with the company's overall campaign. The Prius campaign, in subtle ways, helped consumers see that any Toyota product would be infused with the newest and most efficient technologies.

High-end restaurants offer some of the best examples. Higgins Restaurant and Bar, in downtown Portland, offers a cuisine rooted in the Northwest soil. Skimming the menu and talking to the staff is a bit like a local tour; it is a menu and atmosphere that could not be replicated elsewhere. Chef Greg Higgins is a dedicated activist and a leader in the effort to protect wild salmon stocks, but when he talks about salmon, he rarely starts with an environmental angle.

Instead, he goes right back to the message projected in his restaurant: He talks of the brilliant tastes that can only be found in the Pacific Northwest and offers tantalizing descriptions of the color, texture and aroma that characterize the many unique runs of wild salmon. The ethical arguments in support of wild salmon fisheries (and against salmon farming) are secondary. He is helping to save salmon, while at the same time celebrating regional cuisine. His message as an activist mirrors his message as a business owner.

Two questions can help a company retain message discipline: Can we describe our environmental and social innovations in the same way that we describe our company overall? Can we tell our sustainability stories in ways that reinforce our primary brand message? If executives ask these questions often, brand managers are more likely to see sustainability efforts not as a distraction, but as an aid. And that could lead to an alliance that brings new energy and resources to the work of sustainability.

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