



Sustainability Marketing in an Uncertain Economy:

*Ten strategies to keep your
sustainable brand healthy.*

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There's a standard journalistic trope that abounds during times of crisis: take the hot topic du jour, mash it up with something you know about, and you've got an instant article. For example: "Peanut Butter Preferences during a Global Recession," or "Sparrow Migration Patterns during the 2008 Wall Street Collapse." In this white paper, we've got a bit more basis for the mash-up: after nearly a decade of build-up, sustainability and "green" were the issues du jour for much of 2007 and 2008, but with the recent market crash, the national dialogue has turned more towards keeping a roof over your head than keeping a green roof over your head. So what's a sustainable brand to do? Here are a few strategies to keep you afloat during these tumultuous times.

Strategy 1: Take pride in your beliefs

First, take pride in your sustainable brand, and know that there's a strong core of people out there who still care about sustainability and who will continue to care. They may not use the word, but they've been getting on the path for quite some time now — buying organics, recycling, using CFLs, embracing companies that support fair trade and social/environmental causes, seeking out local products, seeking less toxic products for home and body, seeking health and wellness and a more balanced and simplified lifestyle, supporting positive environmental actions and social justice whenever possible. This constellation of behaviors all comprises sustainability: it represents a psychic evolution that people go through over time, and it's difficult to go backwards once you've begun to progress down the path. So while we'll likely see pullbacks from the double-digit growth we've seen in most sustainability sectors in the past



decade (because of a general economic slowdown), the fundamentals here are still sound. Sustainability-seeking “conscious consumers” exist along a continuum, defined by all the various “sustainable” actions people may or may not take, and comprise as much as 85% of the US population — with around 20% of the population far enough into this mindset that it’s come to be part of their identities. These people are not just going to evaporate. A recent poll confirms this: 85% of people still want to purchase products from socially responsible companies, economics be damned.

Strategy 2: Don’t stop now

Which means: if you’re a “core” brand with true sustainability cred, you’ll do just fine, and you’ll probably even outperform the market at large. If you were just greenwashing, then now would be a good time to stop — the mass market is more concerned with “value” than with values at a time like this (no matter what they might claim on a survey), and the people who were just chasing the green trends will fall away as their 401k’s collapse. But if you’re doing some bona fide good in the world, then you’d do well to keep going. The climate isn’t going to stop changing anytime soon, awareness about toxicity issues will only become more sophisticated over time (witness the recent mainstream awareness about BPA and the shift towards glass baby bottles), and the need for sustainability will become more and more urgent as a global issue, even as the economy suffers. (And if Obama’s new green deal falls into place, economic recovery and a burgeoning sustainability scene could become one and the same.)

Strategy 3: Be more socially responsible than ever

Be socially responsible. Talk about it. Be more socially responsible than ever. Talk about it even more. Conscious consumers care much more about a company’s internal socially responsible actions (how they treat their employees) than about their environmentally responsible ones. And this sentiment will only grow stronger during a period when job security is at a 35-year low. Companies that treat people well will be seen as islands of enlightenment during this era of massive layoffs and paycuts, and the more that you talk about the real things you’re doing that are truly humanistic, the more that the “conscious consumer” will be drawn to your brand. Did you know that Patagonia lets everyone go surfing when the tide is high? That the revolutionary Brazilian company Semco lets employees (er, “associates”) determine their own salaries? That Google offers everyone on

their main campus three organic meals each day? These are the sorts of things that conscious consumers care about, and that will ultimately help differentiate your brand. And – oh yes – it’s the right thing to do. So now is a good time to look deep into your operating principles and find real — not just gimmicky — ways to make employees feel valued and cared about.

Strategy 4: Promote quality over consumption

Anticipate growing anti-consumption attitudes, and focus on offering a quality experience. In times like this, people will have a natural “sour grapes” attitude towards consumption in general, and will resent the mere existence of goods that they simply cannot afford, even rejecting the very idea of “consumption” if they’re already down the path to sustainability. All of the core tenets of sustainability are consistent with a less “consumptive” lifestyle and a more high-quality offering, so if you’re in this space, you’re probably already poised for success during an economic downturn. Now is the time to ask yourself some serious questions about your product offerings, your brand, and your messaging — “quality” is a core conscious consumer value, and will become even more so as people become (by necessity) increasingly selective about what they buy. Patagonia has actually elected to halt growth altogether — they’ve reduced their clothing line by 30%, proclaiming that people simply do not need that much stuff, and that their products are made to last. As the recession continues, people will become less and less willing to buy items that do not feel lasting, substantial, and soul-nourishing. And they’ll become even more annoyed at the standard tactics and tone of traditional “push” marketing.

Strategy 5: Help calm fears and anxiety

That said, affordable luxuries and “guilty” escapist pleasures will thrive in this environment, as they did during the Great Depression and every other economic downturn. And if you can tap into these trends, you’ll capture the hearts and minds of people who are living in a state of heightened fear and desperation. The twist: you’re actually giving people something that has a positive impact on their life and the planet (relatively speaking, of course). Whether it’s organic “nutriceutical” chocolate that promises “bliss” on the packaging, or a super-soft organic cotton t-shirt that fits gorgeously and feels like spun clouds, if you offer people small and affordable thrills, they’ll be captivated by whatever you have to offer, and they’ll actually feel good about themselves after the purchase. And



if you can cue certain qualities like “handmade,” “nourishing,” “thriving,” or “spiritually uplifting,” your offerings will feel that much more luxurious, because these are the new values that define “luxury” for the conscious consumer who has moved beyond the traditional Western model of luxury (that, frighteningly, China and India are only now beginning to discover.

Strategy 6: Leverage inexpensive and powerful social technologies

You’ve probably got less money to spend on marketing these days, but social networks are a powerful way to spread the word. Pay attention to digital outreach, and two-way communications within the digital space. People who have incorporated sustainability into their identities feel great about touting products in this space — it’s still so difficult to find great “responsible” products and services out there that conscious consumers tend to do a lot of talking within their networks about what they’ve found. And a great find reflects well on a person’s sensibilities and, crucially, their values — unlike purchases in the vast unsustainable space, which merely identify a person as a consumer. So master the digital space, — start twittering, develop a facebook fan base, keep a transparent two-way conversation going with your core consumers (and cultivate evangelists whenever possible), make your own website compellingly interactive, and you’ll find that your marketing dollars go a lot further.

Strategy 7: Attract with your values—not your pricing

Don’t condescend to people with heavy-handed “value” messaging, which has become ubiquitous during the past few months and shows no sign of abating. As a brand in the sustainability space, you’re focused on a triple bottom line, and your core consumers care about this. By suddenly focusing on cost, you risk seeming manipulative and off-brand. People are perfectly capable of figuring out whether they can afford you or not. “Green” products have had enough trouble gaining traction during the past decade because of premium pricing (among other reasons), and now would not be a great time to draw attention to the not-so-small matter that products and services in this space tend to cost a little bit more. Conscious consumers aren’t buying your product because you’re the cheapest — this was never your value proposition, and never should be. You know about true cost economics, and so do your core consumers. And even the “mid-

range” consumers know that “you have to pay a little more” for things that are safer or higher-quality. Don’t compromise your values at a time like this. (But if you’re way out in eco-luxury land, you might have more of an uphill battle these days. Take solace in the fact that even during the Great Depression, low-key luxury still flourished and 75% of people were employed. And that “green” came to be associated with quality and innovation before the 2008 market crash, so its cachet is actually based on something real.)

Strategy 8: Give freely—but carefully—to build brand love

Given that people will, realistically, have trouble affording you, be generous. Very generous. And if you do this with free stuff and loyalty programs, rather than price reductions, people will love you all the more. Price reductions cheapen your brand; thoughtfully-architected giveaways feel like gifts and create deep feelings of attachment. During the Great Depression, movie theatres used to give away sets of silverware — piece by piece, week by week — and played to full houses even in the worst of times. Sampling is one of the most powerful known tactics for food products — 24% of people, when given an in-store sample of a product, will buy it instead of the product they intended to buy. So give things away. Give freely and cleverly, and people will flock to your brand, especially in times like these, when a generous sample will take on heightened significance to a heart more accustomed to privations.

Strategy 9: Be mindful of the growing cultural shift

And finally, understand the deep roots of the sustainability movement. This will give you the deepest clues about what to do, how to express it, and what conscious consumers really want. To understand a movement, we must look to the beliefs of its innovators and early adopters — this is where it all begins. Sustainability is not a fad or a trend. It’s a seismic cultural shift, and it’s here to stay. Most of our evolutionary history has been spent living sustainably. To the extreme conscious consumer (who would probably balk at the word “consumer”), our current unsustainable mess of a burning planet is seen as a big socio-cultural mistake facilitated by short-sighted application of technological innovation and the amoral reach of unchecked capitalism. Mental illness is, quite understandably, at an all-time high (50% of Americans suffer from clinical levels of stress, anxiety, depression, or personality disorders.) People

feel less and less in control of their lives nowadays, and want to gain a sense of peace and purity and balance and real interpersonal connection and soulful depth in their day-to-day existence. And so, things are finally changing. We're just beginning to come out of a dark age now, and there's no turning back. Record numbers of MBA students want to incorporate sustainability into their careers; 80% of Fortune 500 companies have CSR reports. Yes, nobody is really there yet – watching corporations take steps towards sustainability is like watching an infant learn to crawl. But we'll get there. As innovators, we can see that the rest of the world has no choice. They'll have to catch up, or there will be no more world to live in. As we ease out of decadent late capitalism and into a more sustainable way of life, transparency, authenticity, balance, egalitarianism and distributed models will become the norm – it's just a matter of time.

Strategy 10: Question if they really need your offering

Because, in fact, the current economic climate is a direct result of our previous excesses. And a correction is actually a good thing. So think hard about what you're trying to sell. Question it from every angle, and ask yourself if it's truly necessary. Change is afoot. Peer-to-peer networks are developing powerful alternatives to gratuitous consumption — fashionistas exchange unwanted clothing at “swishing” parties; couchsurfing.com makes hotels obsolete; freecycling, freeganism, and all manner of “borrowing” networks are emerging day by day. These trends challenge conventional purchasing models at every step. So ask yourself what you truly want to give people, whether they truly need it, and — crucially — if they might just find another way to get it. Challenge your own sustainability practices at every point, and we might just make it through alive.



egg is a brand communications agency that specializes in building relationships between conscious consumers and sustainable brands.