



Point of View

Happy Eco Holidays: How a little green sheen can make gifts merrier this year

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% According to a recent poll conducted by the Global Strategy Group, 87% of consumers are more likely to buy products from a retailer that is committed to environmentally friendly practices. BizJournals.com | 7.18.08

% 76% of U.S. consumers said that company ethics and behavior form the basis for more purchasing choices than had been the case five years ago. 70% of respondents identified quality of goods and brand trust as their purchasing criteria, 39% cited corporate ethical reputation as buying criteria, and 38% said price and value are their drivers. The Body Shop Consumer Survey | 7.08

% 27% of consumers will use fewer plastic bags from supermarkets and other stores this holiday season, and 20% will consider not wrapping holiday gifts to conserve paper. These responses concerning the environment and holiday shopping intentions were consistent across gender, age and income groups. Deloitte Annual Holiday Survey | 11.07

Values of the green holiday shopper:

Conscience

- Fair trade, fair treatment of employees/laborers
- Percent of profits to a green cause (or other cause)
- Transparency on processing, manufacturing
- Initiatives on the brand's part to help the environment relative to its products

Practicality

If the ghosts of shopping seasons past are the bellwether of shopping seasons yet to come, the retail weather inside malls is frightful. Last year saw only a 3% increase of holiday sales numbers, and this year's projections stand at just 2.2% (NRF.com 1.15.08). Although the "shopping recession" won't stop consumers from gifting this year, holiday shoppers likely will want to add a little more purpose to the package to stretch those dollars with more meaning — a sprig of green, a cup of cause or, at the very least, some punchy practicality for added value.

The joys of gifting

As the nation approaches — then recovers from — an election, adjusts to higher fuel and food prices and looks toward altogether tougher times, giving gifts becomes more about translating hope and transferring a feeling of relationship than about giving yet another *thing*. This year, watch for even mainstream consumers to seek green options in gifts, and they'll be bringing a decent knowledge of buzzwords (parabens, phthalates, post-consumer waste, biodegradable, recyclable, etc.). Despite the rush of the season, knowing the backstory on the manufacturing and packaging will still matter, especially as it relates to kids and the safety of products. Cause-related products — and knowing that the brand supports fair labor laws or donates a percentage of proceeds to charity — deliver a double whammy on the reason for the season. When belts tighten, each and every gift choice is more heavily scrutinized.

Five green themes to burn brands brighter

While consumers have become increasingly wary of products festooned with greenwashing, focusing on a few simple themes can garner gifters' attention amidst the smorgasbord of holiday choices.

The greener good

With the economy falling apart, holiday pocketbooks will be thin, and there may just be a return to the true meaning of the holidays — goodwill and cheer. Consumers who do decide to buy material goods will likely be more precise and intentional in their gifting behavior. These holiday shoppers will be delighted with the green value-add: It feels good to buy, good to give and good to receive. Even though eco-friendly products are much more common nowadays, they still have cachet.

- Highlight green products with a special in-store section.
- Tout certifications and any alliances with green organizations.
- Be transparent about ingredients and manufacturing processes.

Perfect packaging

Thrifty holiday shoppers will be out to get more by consuming less. They're over unnecessary packaging — for dark-greens, that includes new wrapping paper — especially when they have "to recycle or not to recycle?" weighing on their conscience post-party. For consumers fed up with "stuff," this year's holiday wish is for companies to help them in minimizing waste.

- List a few short green wrapping ideas on receipts (newspapers, "brown paper packages tied up with string," crayon decorations, etc.).
- Feature reuse and recycle ideas on product packaging.

G-commerce

E-commerce is morphing into G(reen)-commerce. Last year saw a 19% increase in online shopping for the holidays (Comscore.com 12.30.07), presumably because it's a great way to track spending *and* research products on the consumer's own schedule. Because shopping online is already a great way to compare ingredients and read reviews, calculating conservation and finding green deets are logical extensions of the convenience.

- Describe how deliveries minimize fuel consumption and save shoppers gas money. (And provide free shipping whenever possible.)
- Cluster green products together in a prominent eco section of your site.

- Recycled/minimal packaging
- Multiple use — of product or packaging
- Gift is both enjoyable *and* needed

Health, safety

- Ingredient transparency
- Toxin-free packaging
- Healthy materials, organic cottons

Sustainability

- Sustainably harvested ingredients
- Cradle-to-cradle design and manufacturing
- Take-back programs, closed-loop processes

Convenience

- Buying online (driving less, more information)
- Informed shopping assistants
- Bundled green purchasing opportunities

Fulfillment

- Buying local, or at least knowing how far gifts travel
- Giving the gift of a cause

Eco-expert customer service

A shopper walks into a store and says, "I want to buy green!" Will anyone be able to help? Employees trained in explicit eco benefits can maximize shopper wallet share by helping consumers get the most green for their green with confidence and ease.

- Transform your sales associates into passionate brand ambassadors for eco-friendly gifts; the gifter will be all the more enthused to share the information with the giftee upon opening.
- Train employees to ask whether shoppers need a bag or a receipt, showing that your operation is keeping pace with the trend toward less waste.

Fantastic plastic

When all else fails, good things come in small packages. Folks who have had it with useless tchotchkes may opt for cause-related gift cards that pay it forward, such as those offered by CharityGiftCertificates.org, TisBest.org and JustGive.org. Even traditional gift cards can be world-benefiting when made from recyclable bioplastic.

- Offer gift cards with percent matches toward a local cause or charity.
- Match bioplastic cards with purchasing intent; extend a discount on green-related purchases with use of the card.

Best-practice trends in green retail

Building eco-friendly stores according to green building standards: Best Buy; Kohl's; REI.

Use of sustainable raw materials: Gap's partnership with World Wildlife Fund and International Finance Corporation to promote sustainable cotton cultivation practices.

Green giveaways: The Home Depot gave 1 million CFL bulbs to its customers on Earth Day 2007.

Educating the staff: In all IKEA stores there is an environmental coordinator on staff who monitors operations. All new hires are required to participate in an environmental education program and often receive folding bicycles for commuting.

Reducing energy use and carbon footprint: Whole Foods, Cliff Bar and many other companies have converted their truck fleet to biodiesel fuel.

Recycling programs: JCPenney recycles 150 million plastic hangers per year.

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