

5 steps to stimulating demand for sustainable products in a competitive marketplace

 By [Justin Smith](#)

3 Sep 2015

Responsibly sourced timber is better for the environment, better for business and better for everyone involved in the timber trade, but how do we communicate that to consumers?



© Siegfried Kopp – [123RF.com](#)

Sustainability is increasingly a consumer priority. Earlier this year Barack Obama said: "We are the last generation that can do something about climate change." The US President's words prove that environmental issues are high on the political and social agenda, supporting the idea that more consumers than ever understand the ethical and environmental impact of the products they purchase.

This puts more pressure on companies to be transparent about the provenance and environmental credentials of their products. With this growing consumer awareness - and the notable operational efficiencies that it can offer - it's unsurprising that big business is starting to take a more sustainable approach.

However, for many consumers, this awareness isn't yet translating into a willingness to pay a significant premium for sustainably produced and resourced products. This means it's down to brands and organisations to generate demand and move the 'sustainability sell' into the mainstream.

Here are my five tips for crafting a strong 'pull' message that will educate consumers and increase demand for sustainably sourced products.

1. Have a single clear message

It might be marketing 101, but it's so often ignored. Within your marketing material you need to convey one compelling and clearly defined message about your sustainability credentials. Every company has multiple internal stakeholders all wanting to have their voices heard, but your job is to distill those points of view into a succinct and easily digestible message. You won't be able to make everyone happy all of the time, but if you focus on creating an easily understood proposition, you'll immediately have an advantage over many of your more confused competitors.

Do: Be transparent about your sustainability efforts.

Don't: Greenwash your products or services by making unsupportable claims.

2. Create a lasting relationship with consumers

Whatever your business, there are few companies that won't benefit from building trust with their audience. You can do this by creating a long-term marketing plan (looking many years ahead, not just for the next 12 months) and then sticking to it. You'll be more consistent and better able to tell stories that support your strategy and business objectives.

Do: Be consistent in your communications and listen to your customers.

Don't: Create one-off pieces of communications that lack context.

3. Look within

This article has, so far, talked only about communications aimed at your customers, but there's no doubt that change happens from within, by talking to your staff and suppliers. By building sustainability into your organisation's culture you can lay the groundwork for a better articulation of your external communication. And let's not forget the operational benefits, like lower costs.

Do: Sell the idea of sustainability to your staff, suppliers and clients.

Don't: Start an internal sustainability drive without supporting with regular communications.

4. Go big

The greater the number of your products that are sustainably sourced, the bigger the benefits to your company and your consumers. Instead of offering a niche line of products for higher-end consumers, going large scale on your operations will yield a lower cost per item and will help mainstream the products and the message.

Do: Expand your line of sustainable products.

Don't: Limit your sustainable products to niche or low volume product lines.

5. Join forces

If you're not already, work with an organisation like FSC to ensure you are getting the best from your certification status. FSC has the marketing power to help you get your message out to consumers and companies in ways you may not yet have discovered. Moreover, there are increasing examples of cross-industry working groups and alliances pooling resources and doing the right thing: telling the world that responsibly and sustainably sourced products are better in every way than the alternatives.

Do: Join with other organisations and promote the advantages of sustainability. Even if they are competitors, you will all reap the benefits.

Don't: Ignore the potential of collaboration, especially if your past methods have not succeeded.

I hope these tips are helpful, but, of course, they are only the start. There is a lot of work to do to continue building trust with consumers and mainstreaming the message that paying that little bit extra for a sustainable product is worth it.

We may only be marketers, but as Barack Obama said, we are all part of the solution - perhaps the last generation that can make a difference. And that means we all have a part to play in helping secure the future of our planet.

ABOUT JUSTIN SMITH

Justin Smith is head of the Woolworths Good Business Journey (Sustainability Programme). He is responsible for the strategy, structure and integration across the business to deliver its over 200 targets across transformation, social development, environmental issues and climate change.

■ #BizTrends2017: Why more than ever, sustainability is good business - 12 Jan 2017

■ 5 steps to stimulating demand for sustainable products in a competitive marketplace - 3 Sep 2015

[View my profile and articles...](#)

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>