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Anatomy of Green Advertising

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ABSTRACT -

Much work has been published, both in scholarly journals and the popular press, about the greening of the American consumer. Most of the past work, if not all, deal with consumer profiles; none deal with "green" advertising. This work is the first attempt to analyze "green" print advertisements. In this study we first provide a framework for analyzing green ads and then use that very framework to analyze a sample of print ads.

INTRODUCTION

Green is in, no question about it. The term "green", as we intend it, implies an underlying concern for preservation of the environment and a noninvasive lifestyle. Generally targets for concerns are the preservation of the planet earth, personal health, and animal life. Moreover, the goal of preservation is generally accompanied with a belief that noninvasive methods have to be employed in achieving those goals. Thus, activities causing the least damage to the planet earth, its environment, human and animal life are preferred.

Concern along these target dimensions have been rising steadily over the past few decades (Bremner, 1989) and is having a major impact on consumer purchasing behaviors (Roper, 1990). According to the Roper Organization study (1990) 11% of all Americans are True-Blue Greens and yet another 11% are Greenback Greens (See Table 1). These segments are identified by their environmental attitudes and behaviors and represent the two greenest segments in the 5-way classification scheme used in the Roper study. Together, they represent a little under one-quarter of all consumers C a very significant market segment especially when one compares it to the market shares of very successful national brands. For example, many heavily advertised and promoted cigarettes turn in a handsome profit with market shares varying between 1% and 3%. Many lesser known brands of household products such as soap and toothpaste survive on market shares as low as 5% or less (Simmons Market Research Bureau, 1990). The point is that the green segment is big enough to accommodate quite a few brands. Further, the two greenest segments, i.e., True-Blue Greens and Greenback Greens comprise of the most lucrative and desirable consumers C affluent and college educated. While the national median income is \$27,100, the median income of these two segments is \$31,850 (Schwartz and Miller, 1991). Likewise, only 19% of all Americans have a college degree; over 27% of these two segments have graduated from college (American Demographics, February 1991).

Many factors have contributed to the growth of the green movement, but none could be more important than the emerging perception that the world is a more polluted place than it was 20 years ago (New York Times/CBS News Poll, April 1990). According to this poll, not only did 75% of the respondents feel that the air was more polluted and 80% feel that the water was more polluted, but that 41% feel that both air and water would be more polluted 20 years hence unless something is done right now. Such pessimistic perceptions have sent a message to political and business leaders who are scrambling to create platforms and programs that placate the environmentally conscious segment. For example, corporations have responded to this shift in the consumer attitudes and the resultant emergence of a new market by launching new products with a green appeal at an ever growing rate. In 1984, 54 new green products were launched; in 1988 178 new green products were introduced (Hinds, 1989). This represents a 230% growth in that 4-year span.

WHO IS GREEN

Consumer researchers have done an excellent job in identifying the green consumer. One of the most detailed studies was carried out by the Roper Organization in which many behaviors deemed environmentally friendly, i.e., using biodegradable/recycled products, and recycling bottles, cans and newspapers, were reported. The list also included behaviors indicative of environmental concern such as reading packaging labels, contributing to environmental groups and lobbying politicians. Cluster analysis was used to identify five distinct segments: True-Blue Greens (11%), Greenback Greens (11%), Sprouts (26%),

Grouser (24%), and Basic Browns (28%). This study also confirmed that green consumers tend to be better educated, earn higher incomes, and hold professional/white collar jobs. (See Table 2 for details), making them a very desirable target market.

Yet, others prefer to classify green consumers in terms of their motivation (Ottman, 1991). Based on a careful analysis of the different type of activist groups and causes, Ottman (1991) postulates three distinct consumer motives: preservation of the planet, preservation of personal health, and preservation of animal life. The first group, "planet passionates", are likely to belong to "Keep America Beautiful" and engage in recycling bottles, cans, and newspapers; whereas the second group, "health fanatics", are likely to belong to "Americans for Safe Food" and buy organic produce only. Lastly, the third group, "animal lovers", are most likely members of the "Humane Society" and buy "cruelty-free" cosmetics and boycott fur coats. (See Table 3 for details.) Such a classification scheme is very useful in terms of understanding the primary motives that drive a green consumer. It is also helpful in creating new product positions.

GREEN ADVERTISING

Although much is known about the green consumer, very little is known about green advertising. There are three very compelling reasons why it is timely and important to study and analyze green advertising. First, the new media has picked up on the green theme and is reporting very extensively on the subject. For instance, the Tyndall Report found that there was an increase of 76% from 1988 to 1989 in the number of minutes devoted by network television to environmental issues. Second, and a closely allied factor, most consumers get information on environmental issues from the mass media (TV, newspapers, magazines, and radio) far more so than either environmental newsletters or government publications (Scott Paper Company study, March 1990). Third, despite the high dependence on mass media for information, consumers do not find that information believable or reliable. In fact, from a survey done by Abt Associates (March 1990) it was reported that the most credible source of information was an environmentally active organization and the least credible was an advertisement place by a major company.

Given the growing attention placed on environmental issues and the heavy reliance of the consuming public on mass media, the dire lack of credibility in green advertising is a shocking state. We believe this to be a strong signal calling for an analysis of green ads. Thus, our paper is about the anatomy of green advertising. At first we present a framework to categorize green ads. Next, we use this framework to analyze our sample of print ads. The results, we believe, will help us understand some of the trends in green advertising.

TABLE 1

GREEN CONSUMERS

METHODOLOGY

Being the first attempt at classifying green advertising, there was no categorizing scheme to fall back upon, although there were quite a few studies categorizing advertisements in general. For example, Shimp, Urbany and Camlin (1988) have categorized print ads for mass-marketing products in the U.S.A., while Tse, Belk, and Zhou (1989) have used content analysis to compare three "similar" societies. Yet others (Pollay, 1985) have employed content analysis to develop and describe a history of print advertising in the USA. Thus, even though there is a tradition of employing content analysis in the literature, there were no ready-made categories for our purposes. Therefore, we had to adapt available categories and create some new ones as we went along.

Among a host of critical issues on methodology, two stood out. First, we had to identify ads that would be included in our study and second, we had to develop a set of relevant categories to classify the ads. These two steps are loosely the equivalent of data gathering and scale development.

CHOICE OF ADS

We decided to focus on print ads for a variety of reasons. The print medium has a broader base than television. This is manifest in two separate ways. First, print medium accounts for more volume of advertising than any other medium, and second, it has a larger array of advertisers, including small businesses and local businesses, participating. The first factor, i.e., volume of advertising, is important in that we could generate a large sample of ads for our analysis. The second factor, i.e., array of advertisers, is important in that it represents a larger spectrum of participants thereby ensuring that our sample ads was adequately representative of the advertising community.

Over and above those were practical considerations. We were given access to a personal library that was the store house of thousands of ads, articles and reports that addressed the issues of environment, health, and animal life preservation. We selected the ads for our study from this vast pool, using three cardinal principles. First of all, it had to be an ad; we rejected all articles and reports from this collection. Second, we included an ad in our study only if it addressed any one of the three issues, i.e., preservation of the planet, personal health or animal life. Third, and finally, multiple occurrences of the same ad were eliminated by including each ad only once. It is important to note here that we did include multiple ads for the same product/brand/company as long as they were not identical. The result was a collection of 173 ads that were used in the study. Although this procedure was dictated by a matter of convenience, it is not entirely flawed. The original collection was a large assortment of ads, articles and reports compiled over five years or more. Thus, we believe that the specific ads selected for our study represents a fair cross-section of green ads in general.

MAIN TAXONOMY AND SUB-CATEGORIES

The main taxonomy used in this study was derived from past literature as well as our interest in the subject matter. There were four broad items in the main taxonomy: AD TARGET, AD OBJECTIVE, ECONOMIC CHAIN, and AD APPEAL.

The first item, AD TARGET, was used to identify the target of the ad. Based upon past literature (Ottman, 1991) we identified three targets. These three sub-categories are:

PLANET PRESERVATION
ANIMAL LIFE PRESERVATION
PERSONAL HEALTH PRESERVATION

TABLE 2

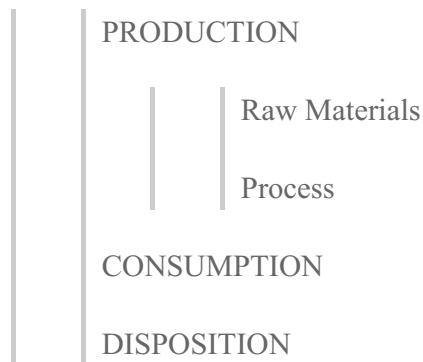
SEGMENTATIONS BY ENVIORNMENTAL ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS

The second item in the taxonomy was AD OBJECTIVE. This was used to identify whether the ad promoted a CORPORATE IMAGE or the PRODUCT/SERVICE itself; these constituted the two sub-categories were identified. Inputs, the first minor category, was defined when the ad highlighted the raw material or production processes used. The second minor category, packaging, was defined when the product's packaging was emphasized in some manner. Finally the overall product/service itself was defined as a minor category when the product/service was promoted in general. Following is a summary of the sub-categories and minor categories.

CORPORATE IMAGE
PRODUCT/SERVICE CHARACTERISTIC
Inputs
Packaging
Overall Product/Service

The third item in the main taxonomy was ECONOMIC CHAIN. This was used to identify the different activities involved in the closed loop of an economic system. Our identifying this item in the taxonomy is in response to the call to expand the focus of marketing from that of a purely selling institution (Kotler and Levy, 1969). Nicosia and Mayer (1976, p. 69) used the terms buying, using, and disposing in their theory on the sociology of consumption. We have adapted that trilogy for our purpose and the sub-categories we use are PRODUCTION, CONSUMPTION, and DISPOSITION. Essentially we have changed the emphasis from buying

to production, while retaining the other two categories. This is because motivating a consumer to buy is the implicit goal of all advertising, and hence that sub-category may not be very useful. However, ads that emphasize production would be worthy of being identified as a separate sub-category. We wish to point out that there is a logical sequence to these sub-categories in that production typically precedes consumption and both of them precede disposition. [Actually "buying" (or purchasing) will be in between these two activities, but has been omitted for reasons already specified.] Thus, the three sub-categories are:



Only in the case of PRODUCTION, we identified two minor categories, i.e., Raw Materials and Process. Ads that emphasized the inputs to a production process would be classified under the first minor category, whereas those that emphasized the actual process itself would be classified in the second minor category.

The fourth and final item in the main taxonomy was AD APPEAL. This was used to categorize the type of appeal employed in the ad. Based on the literature (Russell and Lane, 1991; Ottoman, 1991) and our own analysis of the ads, we identified five sub-categories, with each sub-category encompassing a few minor categories. Those that could not be easily classified were coded under a catch-all category. The sub-categories and the minor categories are as follows:

ZEITGEIST	
	Mere Statement
	Bandwagon
EMOTIONAL	
	Fear
	Guilt
	You Make a Difference
FINANCIAL	
	Money-Off
	Cause Subsidy
EUPHORIA	
	Health
	Natural
MANAGEMENT	
	Control
	Social Responsibility
OTHERS	
	Comparison
	Exemplar
	Celebrity Endorsement

ZEITGEIST is defined as the general climate prevailing at a time. Thus, any ad that merely tried to ride on the current wave of the green movement was classified in this category. An ad was placed in the first minor category if there was nothing more than a bland statement, e.g., Brand X is environmentally friendly. It was placed in the second minor category if there was an obvious attempt to hitch the company to the green movement, e.g. In response to the growing demand for an environmentally friendly product, we are proud to offer Brand X. All ads that heavily relied on an emotional appeal to stimulate a consumer were classified

in the second sub-category, i.e., EMOTIONAL. Those using the emotions of fear or guilt were placed in the respective minor categories. Ads that made the consumer the focal point were placed in yet another minor category. The next sub-category, FINANCIAL, was used to identify all of those ads that emphasized the financial aspects either directly through money-off coupons (first minor category) or through subsidizing certain causes (second minor category). The theme in the next sub-category, EUPHORIA, was intended to capture all the ads emphasizing a sense of well-being. Typically a sense of euphoria was invoked either by emphasizing the health aspects or the use of natural ingredients; these determined placement of an ad in the appropriate minor category. The last sub-category, MANAGEMENT, was used to identify ads implying that the corporate entity was, in some sense, proactively involved in the green movement. If the message ascribed a fair degree of management control through a conscious programmatic effort, then the ad was placed in the first minor category, i.e., control. However, an ad was placed in the second minor category, i.e. social responsibility, if the message generally emphasized that characteristic of the corporate sponsor.

CODING

The two researchers themselves acted as the two coders in this study. This does not pose any particular problem of a bias since there were no a priori hypotheses to be tested. Rather, this study is in the tradition of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) wherein the data are analyzed, not with any preconceived hypothesis to support, but with the intent of seeing a pattern emerge. Both the coders simultaneously coded the ads, and any discrepancies were discussed till there was agreement. This one-step procedure was possible because the coding scheme was quite simple. Moreover, being a preliminary attempt at analyzing green ads, we felt that our coding method was satisfactory and adequate.

RESULTS

Given the nature of the data and the exploratory ground-up orientation of this study, (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) analysis of frequencies and cross-tabulation were thought to be the most appropriate techniques. The overall analysis of frequencies is presented in Table 4 and the cross-tabulation in Table 5.

From the analysis of AD TARGET, it is evident that planet preservation is the most extensively used target. This is consistent with the general perception that the green movement grew from environmental concerns. Witness, for instance, the description of the most visible green event, i.e., Earth Day, in the popular press (Begley, Hager, and Wright, Newsweek, March 26, 1990). The entire report speaks of the movement wherein corporations can be seen as "friends of the Earth" and corporations have set up "Save The Planet Departments" (ibid. p.60). The green movement, in order to sustain momentum and growth, will have to expand its target to include other concerns as well.

Advertisers appear to emphasize corporate image slightly more often than product/service itself, but the difference is relatively small. We are not exactly sure about the implication of this finding; we can merely offer a speculative view. Stern and Resnik (1991) replicated an earlier study by Resnik and Stern (1977) and found that other than institutional advertising, information content in advertising had generally increased. In the case of institutional advertising, the reduction in the number of information cues was dramatic (Stern and Resnik, 1991, p. 41, Table 2). since we found more than one-half of the green ads emphasizing corporate image, we can speculate that green advertising may suffer from low information content, thereby leading to its low credibility (Ottman, 1991) and it being perceived as deceptive exploitation (Newsweek, March 26, 1990, p.60).

TABLE 3

SEGMENTATION BY CONSUMER MOTIVES

Based upon our analysis of ECOCHAIN, one striking conclusion was that the three-way categorization was not applicable to over one-half of the ads. For those ads that could be categorized using this scheme, most emphasis was placed on the production phase of the chain.

Within this category, advertising copy typically emphasized the use of ecologically friendly raw materials most often. It is clear that advertisers view the production emphasis as a key one in wooing the green consumer. Disposition was emphasized less frequently than production, although it was moderately frequent in and of itself. With the increasing awareness on subjects like landfill wastes and ever growing laws that regulate disposal behavior (e.g., bottle redemption) it is hardly surprising that disposition is emphasized in over one-third of the green ads.

The concept of locus of control can be gainfully used to shed additional light on the distribution of the ecochain categories. Emphasis on production, whether it be raw materials or process, clearly places the locus of control with the corporate sponsor. That message suggests that the corporate entity is behaving responsibly and being sensitive to the green issues. On the other hand, an ad emphasizing disposition, suggests that the locus of control is shared by the corporate entity and the consumer, although the onus of responsibility lies with the consumer. The implication is that the consumer must behave in a responsible manner and contribute her/his mite by regulating her/his disposal behavior. This approach has the advantage of bringing a consumer into the green movement thereby benefitting the corporate sponsor as well.

We felt that AD APPEAL was the most important variable. Hence, we decided to crosstabulate the frequency distributions of AD OBJECTIVE and ECOCHAIN, respectively, with AD APPEAL. These results are presented in Table 5; both the results were significant

($p < 0.001$). Rather than describe all aspects of these results, in this portion of the discussion, we will selectively highlight aspects worthy of discussion.

The financial appeal, for example, was skewed more toward corporate image advertising. A further breakdown of the financial appeal into its two subcomponents, i.e., cause subsidy and money-off, was very striking. All those that were categorized as "cause-subsidy" (7) were used to promote a corporate image exclusively, whereas "money-off" ads (4) were exclusively used in the case of product/service promotions. Clearly corporate image is better promoted by associating the corporate name with visible and/or major causes (Ross, Patterson, and Sutts; 1992). The other distribution of interest was that of Euphoria; it was mostly used for promoting product/services rather than a corporate image. The one exception was a case when an attempt to build a corporate image was made by emphasizing the use of only natural ingredients.

The crosstabulation of AD APPEAL and ECOCHAIN resulted in many sparse cells since a large number of ads could not be classified under this scheme. In light of this, emphasis on statistical significance must be softened. Nonetheless, there were interesting patterns worthy of discussion. For instance, consumption was rarely used in many of the appeals. However, production and disposition were more extensively used. The use of financial appeals (3) was exclusively related to disposition; even more interesting was that all these appeals were of the "money-off" type. Euphoria was almost exclusively used (13) with production. Clearly advertisers found it easy to associate health and naturalness with their production capabilities.

TABLE 4

ANALYSIS OF FREQUENCIES

TABLE 5

CROSSTABULATION OF FREQUENCIES

CONCLUSION

This was an exploratory attempt in categorizing green ads; nonetheless we cautiously advance three broad recommendations to green advertisers and leaders of the green movement. We found that green ads were most often associated with planet preservation and other environmental issues. The implied target of the green movement is much broader in scope; however, our results show that the target of green advertising is very limited in their scope. Thus, our first recommendation would be that other targets will have to be addressed more directly and more frequently by the advertising community. In fact, that may be the only way to sustain a continued expansion of the green movement.

We also found that corporate image ads were more frequent than product oriented ads. As we have stated earlier in the paper, this alone does not account for the low credibility of green ads. Nonetheless green ads are plagued by low credibility (Economist, 1990) thereby leading to many governmental probes (Lawrence and Freeman, 1990). Our second recommendation would be for the advertising community to be proactive and create a standard lexicon for many over used word such as "environmentally friendly", "recyclable", "safe", and "natural". In fact, government regulators have already initiated work in this regard. The advertising community can go a long way in assuaging consumers' feelings and ward off potential backlash by adopting a proactive and cooperative stance.

Lastly, we found that consumption was rarely emphasized in green ads; the predominant emphasis was on production. This is almost like a throwback to the pre-marketing era from which we have emerged. Our third and final recommendation would be that green advertisers adopt the fundamental marketing maxim, i.e., emphasize the consumer and consumption, not the producer and production.

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