Marketing Green Globally: Catering to Cultures

Melissa Mulkey
Green Marketing Globally: Catering to Cultures

“Green marketing” is a relatively recent phenomenon; alert consumers all over the world have become familiar with environmental marketing messages in recent years. In the United States, numerous organizations – even including college campuses – are “going green.” Recent political and scientific trends are largely responsible for consumer preoccupation with environmentally friendly consumption; concerns about global warming, specifically, have given rise to concerted efforts on the part of the world’s shopping public to conserve and preserve. Where once convenience placed first as a core benefit sought by most consumers, “greenness” is rapidly gaining ground for many. Walter Coddington (1993) defines green marketing as “business practice that takes into account consumer concerns about promoting preservation and conservation of the natural environment” (p. 3). Coddington was speaking at the time from an American perspective, but green marketing is far from a uniquely American undertaking. Multinational corporations as well as local firms in foreign markets are tapped into the practice in increasing numbers. In a world where local and regional markets are ever converging into global ones, a movement with the potency of the green trend becomes far-reaching with considerable speed. And given that the green movement generally portends to stanch the bleeding of a wound suffered by all of those who inhabit planet Earth, its moderate-to-significant global success is no surprise. However, despite the global trending of many markets, and despite the global implications for the practice of green marketing, the fact remains that people in different regions are motivated differently to conserve, and cultures receive and respond to marketing messages differently. In order for global marketers to promote their firms’ greenness, then, those marketers must evaluate the motivations behind consumers’ conservation urges as
well as the communication needs of each culture to which the firm intends to sell its goods or services.

Admittedly, some would argue that environmentalism, ecologism, and being green are three different concepts. However, this paper will assume that the two former are wrapped up in and articulated by the latter. Further, as the global context might imply, “firm” will refer to a firm operating in more than one region or country. Many organizations are (sometimes rightfully) accused of manipulating the public’s green frenzy by promoting themselves as green when, in practice, their greenness is observable primarily in marketing messages rather than in any real sustainability practices. This paper will address only those organizations who engage in ethical green marketing – i.e., those organizations whose marketing messages represent actual sustainability practices (Saha & Darnton 2005). Such sustainability practices can and do range widely, attainable both by firms who sell goods and those who offer services. A firm offering services would be green as to its operations; a firm selling a product could be green in a manufacturing or production capacity or green as to the products themselves (a la curly-Q compact fluorescent light bulbs).

Whether a firm sells goods or services, though, it ultimately has to sell its own greenness. Greenness is an intangible attribute; no one can hold environmental sustainability in his hands. Firms are accustomed to selling intangible product benefits that directly benefit the consumer (such as status afforded by a brand name purchase), but greenness is something of another animal. It has no direct impact on the consumer; in fact, one green product bought by one consumer will, in all likelihood, offer absolutely no measurable impact on the environment. A firm must therefore persuade buyers that its sustainability signifies cooperation in the larger movement to, say, ease up on the release of chlorofluorocarbons and keep the icebergs around
longer, or abstain from releasing noxious chemicals into a water supply. A firm employing green marketing techniques must, then, accomplish at least two tasks: it must ensure that its consumers believe greenness to be beneficial, and it must demonstrate to its consumers that it practices or offers greenness. Presumably, in order for its green marketing efforts to prove most effective, a firm would leap both of these hurdles. Accomplishing the first task to the exclusion of the second would simply drive consumers to another, greener firm; accomplishing the second to the exclusion of the first would violate the first commandment of marketing: know thy consumer. (Consider as a parallel the toothpaste company who marketed itself as containing a superior whitening agent in a region where one’s perceived beauty was directly proportional to the yellowness of one’s teeth.) These tasks, and the tapping into the collective consciousness of specific groups of people required by each, present culture-specific challenges to global marketers.

Before setting about to promote a firm as green, the firm’s marketers must determine how consumers feel about greenness. General concern for environmental sustainability tends to manifest itself differently in different regions of the world. As is the case with most broad patterns of consumer outlook, culture informs a consumer’s perceptions of greenness to a significant extent. A global marketer cannot assume that consumers in one region will share the same attitudes towards greenness with consumers in another region; in fact, a good marketer will expect differences, whether blatant or subtle. How, then, do various regions of the world view environmental efforts? The diligent marketer will perform in-depth research into the attitudes of each region his or her firm intends to enter, utilizing primary and secondary sources as well conducting in-person interviews (Narver & Slater 1990, p. 34). However, a few general trends in region-specific environmental thought follow.
Researchers commonly divide differences in the treatment of environmental issues into Western versus Eastern tendencies. Peter Hay (2002) claims that environmentalism’s conception closely coincided with pre-Romantic/late-Enlightenment sympathies toward nature, in the vein of Rousseau’s “noble savage” and the worry that humanity was in decline from its natural, pre-civilized state (p. 11). Hay distinguishes between Europe on the one hand and North America and Australia on the other, proposing that European green sentiments originally reacted against the threat to human life specifically, while those of North America and Australia have reacted against the threat to any life forms. However, interests have converged in more recent years, and Western environmentalism today is largely a unified attempt to protect the future of humanity as well as other life forms with which humanity shares a planet – and to slow or reverse havoc wrought on the planet itself at the hands of humans (p. 3-4). These intentions align with major religious persuasions of the West: Christianity implies a duty of care on the part of humans toward the creation and toward fellow beings. Though the Western green movement is not expressly religious in nature, its principals are rather in keeping with a Judeo-Christian worldview.

In her study on the practice of exporting environmental practices, Ronie Garcia-Johnson (2000) corroborates Hay’s hypothesis and further extends Western environmental leanings to developing regions in Latin America by way of U.S. multinational corporation investments in those areas. Though she deals primarily with instances in Mexico and Brazil, Garcia-Johnson acknowledges that as US-based multinational corporations have established business in Latin America, Western environmental concerns have trickled down to Latin American counterparts, both naturally and via enforced regulations on the part of the U.S. MNCs (p. 29). Further, as these concerns have begun to manifest themselves in the rethinking of business models in Latin
America, they have been validated by the more general exportation of Western thought in the form of “events, perceptions, ideas, and improved communication technologies as well as civil liberties and free trade” (Garcia-Johnson, p. 31). Garcia-Johnson makes a strong case for the dispersion of Western environmental precepts into developing Latin American regions. Thus, Western concerns turn on a perceived responsibility on the part of humans to safeguard life, human or otherwise; as the progeny of such Western inclinations, the Latin American green movement echoes these same concerns and can therefore be categorized as Western in nature.

Eastern environmentalism is not an altogether disparate undertaking; Easterners and Westerners apply some of the same rationale to their respective green pursuits. Yet the motivational locus differs between East and West. As in the West, religion underpins green efforts for many, albeit often with a more overt and intentional influence. Hay points out that Buddhism and Taoism specifically encourage the careful extension of respect to nature and one’s surroundings as well as to life generally (p. 94). A Middle Eastern perspective can be included in the discussion of Eastern greenness on the basis of its adherence to faith codes in pursuit of environmental friendliness. In a study of consumer willingness to be environmentally friendly, Alhassan Abdul-Muhmin (2007) found that Middle Easterners act in a green manner because of the perceived psychological repercussions that would stem from not doing so – based largely on the religious assumptions that (a) one is directly rewarded or punished for one’s actions in the afterlife or in the next life, or (b) one must do good in order to receive good (p. 245). And herein lies the major difference between Eastern and Western environmentalism. For Easterners, personal consequence (do good or be punished) takes precedence over the moralizing of the Western environmentalists (do good for the sake of doing good).
How, then, do marketers address these variations? In order to market one’s firm as being green, a marketer must first understand why consumers in a particular region value greenness (if indeed they do). But this understanding yields little if it is in itself a firm’s endgame. In order to realize any financial gains (presumably by providing the sought-after greenness) by utilizing these consumer insights, marketers must apply their newfound knowledge to the firm’s marketing messages (Narver & Slater 1990, p. 28). Here again, culture is a key determinant: to communicate effectively to consumers, marketers must first take into account the culture from whence those consumers derive meaning. Since “core benefits of a product are a direct function of the [cultural] environment” (Johansson 2009, p. 64), and since greenness is presupposed as a core benefit in any green marketing campaign, a gainful global marketing campaign requires meticulous research into the cultures of various points of entry. While such research would again necessarily involve careful study into each particular region a firm might intend to enter, including exhaustion of primary and secondary sources as well as a visit to local markets, basic understanding of cultural context and its implications for communications can often catalyze a successful research (and ensuing marketing) campaign.

The cultural context model as espoused by Edward Hall bisects cultures into high- and low-context statuses. As its name might suggest, a high-context culture is one in which context shapes meaning; what is said is not always what is meant, so “‘reading between the lines’ is important” (Johansson 2009, p. 65). By contrast, in low-context cultures, “intentions are expressed verbally. One’s meaning should be explicit…the situation is not allowed to change the meaning” (p. 66). Michele Gelfand and Jeanne Brett (2004) make similar distinctions: “In low-context societies, people usually say what they mean…In high-context societies, a speaker’s meaning will often be only hinted at in what is said and requires familiarity with the culture in
order to be clearly understood” (p. 98). High-context cultures are often categorized as homogeneous, comprised of members with a unified religion and language. “Enculturation and socialization start at an early age in the family” (p. 65). Low-context cultures, on the other hand, are far less homogenized; the value systems and general attitudes of culture members may vary significantly. The United States, for example, as well as much of Western Europe, is considered a low-context culture (though important to note is the fact that culture and country are not synonymous; cultures can and do transcend borders). Eastern countries like Japan land on the high end of the context spectrum, and Latin American cultures tend also to qualify as high-context. Hall would suggest, then, that these high- and low-context cultures demonstrate certain predictable traits based on where they fit in the context model. Donghoon Kim and his research team (1998) find that cultural context implications can be empirically validated, in essence confirming the significance of Hall’s model for market researchers. In a study of two high-context cultures (China and Korea) and one low-context (U.S.) culture, Kim, et al report that “[high-context] subjects are consistent with Hall’s description of high-context cultures, and [low-context] subjects are shown to exhibit tendencies that are consistent with low-context cultures” (p. 507). The task for global marketers becomes, then, not simply to accurately conceptualize cultures as either high- or low-context, but to understand the implications of such a designation and shape marketing communications accordingly.

Certain relationships seem to present themselves between context and geographic location. The Western world, which generally holds to one particular unified view of environmentalism, is in majority made up of low-context cultures; the Eastern world, which generally holds to another particular unified view, consists primarily of high-context cultures; and Latin America acts as a free agent, aligning itself with the West in terms of its green movement and with the East in
terms of its context. These simplified assumptions lay a groundwork upon which marketing research efforts would build, and that groundwork sets forth some basic presuppositions for marketers to utilize in approaching different cultures. Consider first the low-context cultures of the West. A marketer with a firm intending to enter such a region could preliminarily assume that: (a) consumer motivation for being green primarily stems from a perceived responsibility to protect life and the earth, and (b) that communications (i.e. marketing messages) will be taken at face value, since what one says and what one means are ostensibly one and the same. Therefore, marketing messages catered to a region such as this would do well to incorporate facts, studies, or statistical analyses verifying that being green is good and, further, that the firm in question is green.

Miles and Covin (2000) explain that, for firms based in the West, “a superior corporate reputation is both an intangible asset and a source of strategic advantage enhancing a corporation's long term ability to create value” and elaborate further that “environmental performance [has become] an increasingly important component of a company's reputation” (p. 299-300). Approached correctly, a firm can “view environmental investments as…a source of competitive advantage” (p.302). Garcia-Johnson (2000) echoes this sentiment and adds that firms first realized this potential source of advantage when studies proved that “the externalization of pollution was not viable in ecological or economic terms: pollution was waste, and waste was caused by inefficiency” (p.30). These conclusions can shape an effective marketing campaign in a Western low-context culture. Marketers can incorporate these findings into their campaigns by presenting straight-forward data supporting the conclusions and then effectively demonstrating their own firm’s adherence to the ecologism espoused. John Wasik (1996) suggests a message as simple as the basic gist of recent findings on greenness in
corporations: “green corporations pollute and waste less because they use less raw materials” (p. 6). By catering to cultural context in this way, firms simultaneously establish a green reputation and offer consumers something in which they are interested.

Firms in Scandinavia have long been tapped into the low-context green marketing niche. Gad and Moss (2008) explain that Sweden, for example, has one of the longest-established traditions of greenness in Western history. Their research suggests that global marketers use Swedish brands as practical case studies through which to develop their own green marketing messages. Since Swedish brands are ahead of the Western environmental curve, global marketers may assume that their own brands will eventually follow in Sweden’s wake. A particularly important lesson for global marketers to glean from Scandinavian environmentalism to apply to marketing campaigns elsewhere in Western low-context cultures is the criticality of “combining sustainability values in the brand with higher product performance” (p. 114), so that the environmentalism is a core benefit of a product but not the core benefit. A thorough global marketer will find valid models of success in similar regions, such as specific green brands in Sweden, to mine for indications as to how markets may respond to a firm’s green messages and products.

Entering an Eastern high-context culture requires similar attention to detail on the part of global marketing. However, the methods by which marketers appeal to consumers’ green impulses in these regions differs from methods they might employ in Western low-context regions. In Western low-context cultures, a marketer can present messages (i.e. data demonstrating the negative impact of environmental waste) that consumers will accept at face value, but Eastern low-context consumers will not afford these marketing messages the same interpretations. Eastern green movements tend to be reactive against negative personal
consequences from acting in bad faith toward the environment, and messages in high-context cultures contain meaning beyond the words used. Therefore, global marketers promulgating green messages in such a region should begin by emphasizing the personal benefit of being green using implications as well as express statements of fact. If, say, members of a certain culture evaluate any messages they receive about responsibility through the lens of family values, then marketers would need to temper green messages promoting a sense of responsibility to care for oneself and the environment with these familial implications. In this scenario, marketing messages could emphasize benefit to one’s family as well as oneself.

In applying techniques that meld the cultural context with the region-specific motivation for environmentalism, global marketers might find Latin America to be something of a hybrid. While its motivations are predominantly Western, its context is high. Thus, marketers must realize that, though they can appeal to a Western sense of perceived obligation to the environment, they must ensure that the cultural implications of their messages are consistent with their intended green representation. Since time and all it entails – punctuality, strict deadlines, etc. – is perceived as relative or flexible in Latin America (Crist 1968, p. 299-300), then global marketers might filter their green messages through this lens, choosing to deemphasize the “do it now” approach that could characterize a culture with a more rigid view of time. An express message about consumer responsibility to protect life and the planet should here contain intentional implications about celebrating the gift of life. The key is for global marketers to understand the motivations behind a culture’s green tendencies as well as how the cultural context dictates the reception of marketing communications.

The green movement has global implications for both marketers and consumers. That greenness is manifesting itself as an ever-growing concern among world citizens in myriad
regions demands for global marketers to take environmentalism seriously. And if continued wasteful consumption might possibly propel the planet further toward its doom, then any organization concerned about its pecuniary longevity must also necessarily be concerned about the longevity of the earth as influenced by sustainable business practices. Thus, both marketers and consumers have a stake in participating in the green movement. However, while the urge to conserve may be quite universal, the motivations to do so are not. Further, the cultural context from which consumers derive meaning colors those consumers’ interpretation of marketing messages. Global marketers must, then, take into account both consumer motivation and cultural context in order to frame a successful green marketing campaign in any given market. Important to note, however, is that this paper addresses only those situations in which marketers are promoting a green brand to consumers who already have some vested interest in environmental efforts. Further research might address the moral imperative incumbent upon firms – or if in fact such an imperative even exists – to create green products and market them to consumers even if those consumers are not already interested in being green, thus effectively enticing consumers to be green when greenness has not been an expressed core benefit sought by those consumers in the past. Such efforts would require further marketing research into consumer motivations and cultural context, but to new ends. Regardless of the end goal of marketing intentions, though – whether they be to communicate to consumers who have already decided to be green or to consumers who do not currently regard greenness as important – the careful study of consumer attitudes on the part of global marketers is paramount to any marketing messages that successfully benefit both the firm in question and consumers.
References


Retrieved February 2, 2009, from Business Source Complete database.

