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Jacquelyn Ottman: Marketers, Follow That Prius

Toyota Hybrid's Success Shows the Way for Green Wannabes

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Ever since its introduction in 2000, Toyota's Prius has been making headlines. The car has been wildly successful, attracting a broad swath of consumers -- and not just "deep green" ones -- like a powerful magnet, all the while creating a new definition of automotive cool.

Let's start with the car itself. Its distinctive styling and unique silhouette doubled as a moving billboard for the new technology. Inside, passengers get all the creature comforts they expect from pricier vehicles (including BMWs, from whom they stole some market share), like ample legroom and trunk space. They also found a dashboard monitor letting them know just how many miles per gallon they were getting moment to moment. This feature, in essence, made tangible the environmental benefits while making the car that much more fun to drive.

Celebrity thumbs-up

Helping to reinforce the car's image as cool were appearances by Leonardo DiCaprio, Gwyneth Paltrow and other Hollywood celebrities organized by the Environmental Media Association.

Such deft design and marketing underscores why "Makes a statement about me" is the number-one reason Prius owners buy their cars, according to CNW Marketing Research. These results also suggest that Toyota was ultimately successful at bringing in a mainstream audience. So how did they do it?

In seven years of marketing efforts, Toyota at various times targeted not just the "deep green" consumers who would be wowed by the car's 55-mph performance and lower emissions, but rather, various car-buyer market segments, either simultaneously or at different times.

Quiet ride

Consider, for instance, the multi-pronged \$1 million marketing campaign that kicked off with an appeal to early adopters of new technology who would appreciate the car's quiet ride.

A supplemental campaign reinforced the car's green bona fides and secured the green audience by talking about endorsements from such groups as the Sierra Club and National Wildlife Federation.

Later on, when gas prices spiked to \$3 and counting, the message shifted to fuel efficiency, where it remains today. And it didn't hurt that various federal and state laws provided financial incentives and even preference for hybrid cars in high-occupancy lanes.

What does this mean for your green brand? That you should avoid the temptation to lead with environmental benefits. As I mentioned in an earlier column, "How to Stay in the Black While Going Green," while this may help you cull market share among the deep-green consumers, identify your product's more direct, primary benefits in order to draw in a more mainstream audience.

Tie-breaker

Everyone's an environmentalist at heart, so bring in the environmental benefits secondarily, because they can supply the net extra value that can break a tie at the shelf.

While you're at it, underscore your green credibility by using trusted eco-logos (Energy Star, USDA Organic, Fair Trade and Forest Stewardship Council are among the top) or associations with big-name environmental groups.

One last point -- and it's the one that put Prius over the top -- invest in design.

Nike's Considered line, Method's teardrop-shaped dishwashing-liquid bottle and Apple's iPhone are examples of consumers responding to good design for products they consume in public, as well as at home.

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