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## [Eco-Innovation is Core to Green Marketing Success](#)

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*“The New Rules of Green Marketing” author Jacquelyn Ottman explains the importance of sustainable design and eco-innovation to green marketing success.*

In today’s complex world of sustainable marketing issues – from “greenwashing” to sustainable brand identity – [Jacquelyn Ottman](#) says it is no mistake that her latest book, [The New Rules of Green Marketing](#), devotes two entire chapters to green design and eco-innovation.

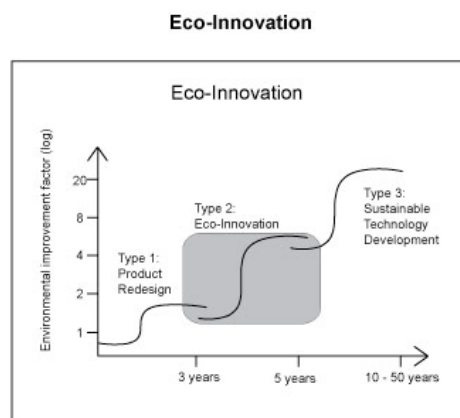
“I love the famous quote from [Skip Humphrey](#): ‘Green your company and the products will take care of themselves. Green your products and the marketing will take care of itself.’ It perfectly encapsulates why eco-innovation and a lifecycle approach to product greening is critical to green marketing success.”

A green marketing pioneer, Ottman has been helping Fortune 500 companies build sustainable products and brands since 1989. She spoke with The EcoInnovator about the phases of sustainable innovation, the potential for eco-innovation to lead to a competitive advantage, and the biggest mistake companies make in their green design initiatives.

### **The EcoInnovator: How do green design, innovation and marketing interrelate?**

**Jacquelyn Ottman:** If your green marketing strategy is only about communication, then the potential is high that it is just “greenwash.” In order to do credible green marketing, you have to start with a legitimately green product – or as green as one as you can get. That’s why design and innovation are drivers of green marketing success.

This chart helps visualize the progressive phases of sustainable product innovation:



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Let me share this brief excerpt from my book which describes the difference between the three phases and their importance to green marketing and company performance.

Existing products can only be tweaked (eco-designed) so much before it becomes necessary to leap to an entirely new product concept in order to meet the same consumer need with significantly reduced environmental impact. At the end of even the most thoroughly executed process, greening a product by making adjustments in raw materials, packaging, and so forth, leaves you, by definition, with pretty much the same concept as when you started. Your toothbrush is still a toothbrush, but now uses recycled materials. Your water bottle is still a water bottle, only the shoulders are a little shaved off, or it is made from aluminum instead of plastic.

Even at the end of a series of multiple iterations aimed at greening, at some point you will find yourself at the end of the first “S” curve labeled **“Type 1: Product redesign,”** unable to achieve greater environmental improvement; you are limited by your product concept.

*In order to achieve significant, not just incremental, reductions in eco impact, you must jump-shift to an entirely new product concept. This is called “eco-” or “functional innovation,” represented by the second “S” curve labeled **“Type 2: Eco-innovation.”** To develop new product concepts that perform the same function as existing products but with significantly less impact, start by questioning fundamental assumptions. For instance, to further reduce the environmental impact of a toothbrush, first consider modifying the task from merely “greening a toothbrush” to, let’s say, “cleaning teeth without a toothbrush.” This might trigger a new product concept such as a specially treated chewing gum that will clean teeth without the need for a toothbrush (and also the toothpaste, water, and the packaging!).*

*To proceed from the second to the third “S” curve labeled **“Type 3: Sustainable technology development,”** you must redefine your task more radically – for instance, from “cleaning teeth” to “preventing the plaque from forming in the first place.” This might lead to developing, say, a benign food additive that would accomplish the task.*

*Moving up and across the three “S” curves in this graph starting with a product concept of a toothbrush made of recycled materials, then evolving to chewing gum, and finally to a food additive, shows how eco-innovation can inspire new products and new business models with significantly reduced environmental impact – and economic benefit as well.*

*Among its many attractive business and green marketing opportunities, eco-innovation represents the potential for significantly enhanced consumer benefits. In the case of the chewing gum, one can imagine significant cost, convenience, and even efficacy plusses (not to mention ending the problem of getting the kids to brush).*

*Rather than simply focusing on eco-efficiency and its desirable but less exciting effect on the bottom line, moving along these “S” curves of sustainable innovation represents the potential for changing the rules of the game, and, as GE experienced with its Ecomagination initiative, the ability to project an image as a leader, innovator, and socially responsible corporate citizen, all rolled into one.*

*Finally, many sustainably innovative companies gain competitive advantage by anticipating future changes in the market. Innovating for sustainability before it reaches the radar screens of others in your industry allows companies to anticipate market changes. Eco-innovative products put their developers, designers, and producers way ahead of the curve, often yielding a first-mover advantage that neatly translates into a better brand image for their products and companies.*

#### **The EcoI: What phase do most companies’ sustainable innovation activities fall into today?**

**JO:** By far, the vast majority of companies involved in green marketing today fall into the first phase. I would say that fewer than five percent of companies are working on true green-innovation initiatives. From my interactions, executives tell me they want to move towards the eco-innovation phase but simply can’t get there yet for one reason or another.

My guess is that a lot of true innovation going on inside major companies is prompted by competition. Consider car-sharing. With startups like ZipCar now on the market, Hertz has begun offering a daily rental rate. Now that gDiapers has innovated a diaper with a flushable liner, you can bet the R&D folks at P&G and Kimberly-Clark are working to come up with a diaper to dissolve in the toilet. So the market will end up driving major companies to eco-innovate – even if the impetus does not begin internally.

#### **The EcoI: What is the biggest mistake made by companies today regarding green design?**

**JO:** Focusing exclusively on the green benefits of the products, and not balancing environmental considerations with consumers’ primary needs. This is actually the primary message of my book.

The mass market green consumer wants to have their cake and eat it too – they want green products without having to trade-off any of the attributes they receive from the traditional versions. Tide Coldwater may help to save the Earth by reducing water and energy usage, but the primary benefit for consumers—which P&G rightly highlights in their marketing— is that it saves money.

The Energy Star label was a huge success because it showed consumers that they could buy the best brands in the market and save money on energy usage without compromising product quality. AFM’s Safecoat paint underscores that it is the “only paint that is doctor-recommended.” Sure, these products produce less pollution and waste as well, but such green benefits are only icing on the cake. Today’s green consumers want to know that such products also save them money and importantly, protect their health.

Companies cannot pursue green design for green design’s sake. Sometimes, such a pursuit leaves products less effective. Consider the fact that recycled content made cartons for Mueller’s pasta less sturdy. SunChips’ “compostable” snack bags were noisy and that this interfered with enjoying the chips—the real reason why people eat them in the first place. American consumers are smart: it’s gotta work – or they won’t buy it again.

**CEF readers can [click here to download a complimentary copy](#) of Chapter 4 from *The New Rules of Green Marketing* by Jacquelyn Ottman, entitled “Designing Greener Products: A Life-Cycle Approach,” and [click here to find out more about the book](#). Contact Jacquelyn Ottman directly via the [J. Ottman Consulting website](#) or [email](#).**

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