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Marketing a Green Product

Make it your goal to show potential customers—environmentally conscious or otherwise—exactly how your offering provides practical value

by [Karen E. Klein](#)

I'm interested in distributing a niche product that falls into the "green" category, but am not sure how to market it. Should we reach out primarily to consumers already buying environmentally friendly products, or try to expand the potential for customers?

—K.W., Roseville, Calif.

There's no doubt the green niche can be lucrative. Environmentally aware consumers tend to earn more and be willing to pay more for green products, such as organic produce and hybrid cars. The problem, however, is that only a very small percentage of consumers make their buying decisions primarily based on the environmental qualities of a product, says Edwin R. Stafford, an associate professor of marketing at Utah State University's college of business. Depending on what your product is, it may very well be difficult to sustain sufficient sales within that niche alone.

Stafford and his colleagues, Cathy Hartman and Jacquelyn Ottman, have done research on green marketing through a U.S. Department of Energy-sponsored research program called "Renewable Energy for Rural Economic Development (RERED)". They've found that positioning green products on their inherent mainstream benefits can broaden their consumer appeal and enhance their likelihood for market success.

"While consumers say in surveys that environmentalism impacts their product choices, a variety of factors typically can impede green purchasing behavior, ranging from their immediate availability to price to convenience to perceived green product effectiveness," Stafford says. "A number of personal motivations and external factors impact green purchasing behavior, and targeting the elusive 'green consumer' can be challenging.

EDUCATING THE CONSUMER

Fortunately, he says, there is great opportunity for marketing green products to the masses, and there are many examples of green products that have gone mainstream due to their practical consumer benefits, including front-loading, energy-efficient washing machines and other appliances, organic foods and heat-reflective windows. "What we see is that the success behind many green products is not their 'greenness,' but the practical value they provide consumers," Stafford says.

Sometimes practical consumer value may not be readily apparent in a green product, however, and that's where education will need to play an important role in your marketing efforts. Make sure that you bundle "consumer value" into the marketing messages for your green product.

"One of my favorites is the slogan, 'Long life for hard-to-reach places,' for General Electric's ([GE](#)) energy-efficiency CFL

flood lights," Stafford says. "That communicates how a CFL's five-year life can be very convenient. The goal of green marketing communications should be to educate consumers that green provides practical consumer value."

Another place where you can take a cue is from the construction industry. Originally, mainstream consumers worried that green buildings would include inferior building materials, leading to decreased longevity. "Mention 'green building' to a traditional home buyer, and the image of Gilligan's Island and bamboo huts comes to mind," Stafford says. "The reality is, however, that green buildings are increasingly cleverly designed, often technically innovative structures that are super energy/resource-efficient, and work in harmony with the seasons. The construction industry has increasingly adopted the term 'high-performance building' to reframe 'green' away from any potential negative connotations."

You can do something similar with your product. Good luck!

[Karen E. Klein](#) is a Los Angeles-based writer who covers entrepreneurship and small-business issues.

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