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Silent Green

Is the best way to market ecofriendly products to keep quiet about the environment?

By **ROB WALKER**



Illustration by Leif Parsons

gDiapers

Jason and Kimberley Graham-Nye could have named their product the Eco-Diaper. After all, one of their chief motivations for selling a “flushable diaper system” is to offer an alternative to disposable diapers, which contribute to landfills and take years to biodegrade. But instead they went with the name gDiapers, which doesn’t mean anything.

Well, they would put it differently: they say that the “g” could stand for “green,” but it could also mean “groovy.” The point is to leave things vague enough that a consumer might be drawn in by gDiapers’ fashionably bright colors, comfort or perhaps just the novelty factor, and then learn that, “P.S., they save the planet,” Jason suggests. While saving the planet seems like sort of too big a deal to reduce to a postscript, the Graham-Nyes figure too much emphasis on the ecofactor would restrict their product’s appeal to what they call “dark green” consumers. GDiapers were introduced in the U.S. just six months ago in a handful of green-friendly stores like the New Seasons Market in Portland, Ore., but after a successful test run at Whole Foods outlets on the West Coast, that chain will soon distribute the product nationally.

GDiapers are positioned as a third option for parents facing the familiar cloth-or-disposable choice. A \$25 starter set comes with two pairs of washable “pants” (in “groovy” red, orange, blue or green) and 10 removable liners; when a liner is soiled, it’s flushed down the toilet. A refill pack of 32 flushable liners costs \$14, roughly the same as 40 Huggies. The Graham-Nyes did not invent the product: they found it at a baby-products expo in Australia, where it has been on the market since 1991 under the name Baby Weenees Eco Nappy Products. They loved the product and felt strongly that it could be successful in other parts of the world — provided it was given a different image, with more broad appeal. So they bought the rights to market and sell it outside of Australia and New Zealand.

Although greenness seems trendier than ever, its limitations as a selling point are the subject of a recent article in the journal *Environment*, titled “Avoiding Green Marketing Myopia.” The authors (Jacquelyn Ottman, Edwin Stafford and Cathy Hartman) argue that many ecofriendly products fail precisely because the companies that make them put too much emphasis on the whole save-the-planet thing. To reach the mainstream, they say, such products need the attributes any product needs: cost effectiveness, convenience, status and so on. The article’s marquee example is a light bulb that flopped when it was

positioned as Earth-friendly but took off when it was reintroduced as a money-saver. In an interview, Stafford and Hartman pointed to the Prius, which enjoys a whopping price premium for reasons that probably have as much to do with status as with saving the planet.

Status is now the most familiar selling tactic for many greenish products, and it is clearly the factor that the Graham-Nyes hope to introduce into the convenience-versus-ethics predicament of the diaper buyer; in fact, they specifically say they want to be “the Toyota Prius of diapers.” GDiapers are more work than disposables, and while the company says the product complies with various official guidelines that make them safely flushable, there’s also a bit on their site about how to handle the “icky” toilet-clog possibility. Still, for parents who find cloth diapers an unacceptable hassle, they provide a new way to obtain the status (or smugness) of avoiding disposables.

The Graham-Nyes have encouraged gDiapers zealots to spread the word about the product through a “Pioneers” program. And from these core, early consumers they have picked up a fresh perspective. Dads, it turns out, have a “different response” to gDiapers, Jason says. “What they love is that there’s no garbage.” Soiled disposable diapers are often stuffed into a device that crushes them down by the score, where they sit until they’re eventually hauled out with the trash. Stafford, a marketing professor and a father himself, says he can imagine bragging to other parents about finding a way to avoid disposables on garbage night. “The nonsmell factor” doesn’t sound sexy, he says, but it’s definitely a concept that even the most eco-indifferent parent can understand. And those, of course, are the parents the Graham-Nyes want most of all.