

## Amidst The Expanding Universe Of Green Products: Sage Words From A Veteran

by John Laumer, Philadelphia on 06.29.07

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With so many new green consumer products offered, we thought it a good time to get some refresher points from [Jacquelyn Ottman](#), New York City-based green marketing and design expert. Jacquelyn is a 20-year veteran who's left her green footprints on the TreeHugger archives [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). Here we go.

**TH:** The US Congress seems to be moving toward enactment of new environmental laws, after a decade-long hiatus. An expanded USEPA budget is even being supported. How risky is it to design a new green product around a prospective US regulatory requirement?

**JO:** - Not sure what you are getting about with "risky". It's risky not to design to regulatory requirements! Like Sony, you might be prevented from marketing your product.

There's also this thing we call "first-in advantage." When it's obvious which way the regulatory wind is blowing, you want to catch the breeze before a regulatory requirement like RoHS reaches it's deadline, so you have a more legitimate marketing position.

Not looking like you waited for the government to tell you what to do gets extra points. Being a "me too" designer is certainly a riskier position from the traditional business marketing standpoint. Negative marketing points for being known only for telling the government how not to regulate or by repackaging with green-wash.

If what you are getting at is an innovation/leadership stance, yes, it's better to be a leader; but you have to do it right. Honda came out with *Insight* ahead of Toyota *Prius*, but Toyota did hybrids right -- roomy 5-person capacity, big trunk versus the Honda insight 2-seater. Even the Accord hybrid has now been pulled.

**TH:** So, if green winners can surface quickly, then long term losers can also be rapidly identified?

**JO:** Not always; but sure, that can happen. With an accelerating number of new green product entries, the early entrants get to the head of the pack, commanding media attention; while the rest string out far behind. It's why there is so much interest in sex appeal in product design, and it might be why we're seeing such interest in green blogs, which can respond quickly to the news cycle.

**TH:** Is there a regulatory tie-in to the other principles you talk about?

**JO:** I wrote an article a while ago entitled, "*Hey Corporate America, It's Time to Talk about Products.*" It demonstrates something very important: consumers, shareholders, community neighbors, etc. etc. understand products more than processes. Underscore your product innovations in corporate ads to create memorable messages about what you are doing as a company. It's part of the success of the eco-imagination campaign. It didn't say "we've cleaned up the way we do business". It said, "we are seizing new opportunities to build our business by meeting our customers needs with innovative new technologies."

**TH:** Can a business win by marketing products strictly on "green" attributes.

**JO:** Consumers don't buy products strictly for green attributes, only for the primary benefits they provide. So green products must first prove that they work - clean, smell good, are affordable, convenient -- the desired attributes. Green is the icing on the cake, "The tie goes to the dolphin". And in some instances what can help substantiate a higher price and then only if the green attributes provide direct benefit, e.g., perceived safety in the case of natural type cleaning products, or organically or locally grown produce.

**TH:** Are people most receptive to green messages related to their immediate personal space?

**JO:** Yes, the more personal the connection the better - and the higher the likelihood

that people will pay a premium. This is all about voluntary control over one's personal world. It's the reason why the fastest growing categories of green products relate to food, clothing, personal care, baby and pet care products.

We have to keep in mind that the planet is not in danger. It will always be here. **We** are at risk. It's a *Save Me* rather than a *Save The Planet* issue.

**TH:** Discuss the importance of authenticity and credibility. How important are various "seals of approval" in communicating this?

**JO:** There's a high distrust of industry when it comes to green. Industry retains its reputation as polluter, a stereotype that hangs around, fair or not, for decades. And, it was industry who back in the 1970s when this was first "hot" came out with green products that didn't work; and who in the late 80s, early 1990s came out with all types of spurious claims about biodegradability, etc. So, third party seals help underscore credibility. The challenge here is that there are now so many of them.

One label that has "broken through the clutter" is *Energy Star*, which happens to be a client. Through long term dedication and focus, USEPA made the *Energy Star* label for energy efficiency the second most recognized eco-label after the 'chasing arrows' for recycling.

**TH:** Can you estimate the worth of the green product market in just the US?

**JO:** Do a google search and look for size of the LOHAS market. Estimates were around \$300 billion in 2003, something like that. It's probably viewed as much larger by now.

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Bravo! Another transformative woman years ahead of her time as a leader of the green movement. I just read a great book called *Women in Green: Voices of Sustainable Design* by Kira Gould & Lance Hosey that traces the influence of similarly inspiring women who have been eco-pioneers. Women like Rachel Carson, Hunter Lovins, Donella "Dana" Meadows and Ms. Ottman have been giving voice to the human, health and personal side of environmental issues for so long. Thank goodness the rest of us are finally listening.

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Wow! Jacquie sure knows here stuff! That was a great interview. I really learned a lot!  
Thanks!

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Interesting article!

I do happen to think that "green marketing" is something of an oxymoron. IMHO, cutting back on excessive consumerism is far more effective than trying to buy green.

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