

# Startup Journal

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## How to Market Goods As Environmentally Friendly

By PAULETTE THOMAS

**Question:** I just started working for a small company with six employees that sells specialty industrial-cleaning products made from corn and soy byproducts. They are biodegradable, inexpensive, made from renewable resources and work as well or better than other cleaners, solvents or disinfectants without presenting health risks. But when we contact large companies, they turn us away as just another salesperson. How do I get the big dogs to look at us?

-- *Andy Curry, Mitchell, S.D.*

**Andy:** To borrow a phrase from Kermit the Frog, "It's not easy being green."

Marketing explicitly "green" products can be tricky. You must make certain that there is more to your product than a feel-good message. And that's doubly true when you are selling to big business.

Jacquelyn Ottman has pondered this terrain for a while. Her New York-based firm, J. Ottman Consulting Inc., has worked with corporations as large as IBM Corp. and Pitney Bowes Inc., as well as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's ENERGY STAR labeling program.

"If you are marketing to the mass consumer, and wrap your product in a 'green' cloak," she says, "chances are that a large majority of consumers think the product doesn't work or it's overpriced or that they won't be able to believe the claims that you make." Much of this perception, she adds, stems from the 1970s, when certain companies rolled out laundry detergents and light bulbs that were marketed as "environmentally friendly," but didn't have much more to recommend them.

Moreover, consumers have grown so sophisticated that it doesn't make sense to market with a "green" sales pitch, as if it's a monolithic group. "Maybe someone buys organic produce for her health," she says, "and someone else buys a Toyota Prius for energy efficiency." But both are considered "green" products.

As a model of excellent green salesmanship, Ms. Ottman cites the marketing around the Prius, the hybrid electric car. Initial advertising focused on its superior performance. After that splash, it was advertised in upscale magazines touting its environmental and energy-saving benefits.

Your company, Andy, isn't marketing to the mass consumer, but operates in a business-to-business context.

You may need to refine your image and marketing materials to calibrate it more strongly toward the effectiveness message. Are you the best industrial and machine cleaner? Then say that first. "One thing any manufacturer of green products has to do often is to reassure your consumer about performance," says Ms. Ottman.

She has other suggestions. She asks, for instance, to whom are you directing your sales message? For heaven's sake, the corporate "procurement" department should be about the last stop on your list. Make your pitch to the facilities people. Ms. Ottman notes that many industrial companies are taking pains to be as safety and health conscious as possible. They don't want to blow it by using toxic chemicals to clean. Find out who is in charge of risk management and make your case to that person as well. Union representatives might even be pressed into making your case, if they are particularly concerned about irritants in other industrial cleaning products.

She suggests that you make your pitch to the corporate communications people -- the folks at the top of that department. They're paid to care about how their company is perceived by the public and to what extent they can claim to be good corporate citizens. Wouldn't they like to be known as a company that wisely uses these environmentally friendly products?

You also should seek testimonials from your current happy customers. Those are persuasive statements. And then don't hide them on a back page of your Web site, but get them front and center in your marketing materials. You can make the proposition, I'd think, that your products, derived from corn and soybeans, support American farmers.

With a strong product and an effective pitch that reaches these audiences, you'll have a good chance at proving Kermit wrong.

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