



Is Sustainability Sustainable?

Once upon a time, there were consumers, green consumers, people who happily foraged land and sea for products that met their rigorous standards of sustainability. By Frank J. Lampe & Monica Emerich, Ph.D.

In 2011, we're left wondering—be we manufacturers, retailers or nonprofits—just what motivates the green-economy machine these days? Is a sustainability label on our latest innovative product enough? What's working and what's not in the arena of sustainability?

In 2000 the first consumer research was conducted, in collaboration with NMI, on what was termed LOHAS Consumers. The coining of the term *LOHAS*, for “Lifestyles Of Health And Sustainability, was an attempt to generate new ways

to perceive the natural marketplace and which could, hopefully, stimulate new partnerships among trade members and further foster and promote the goals and visions of sustainability.

Since then, the LOHAS marketplace burgeoned, spawning all manner of products, partnerships and potential for socio/economic reform all around the world. However, LOHAS is shifting and morphing under pressures inherent in the globalized world particularly those erupting from the economic crisis.

Those of us who proudly work in the sustainability sector need to be alert to these fissures, because every crack is not just an obstacle—it's also an opening to unexplored territory, one rife with opportunity for expansion of sustainable efforts through good products, targeted education, and serviceable strategies that help people and planet.

Two recent LOHAS studies—a consumer study from NMI and a business study from the United Nations—illustrate these changes. At this year's LOHAS Forum, held in Boulder, CO, executives from NMI gave a thought-provoking presentation on what exactly "sustainable" means in 2011 from the perspective of the consumer. The answer: Maybe sustainability doesn't mean exactly what you thought it does. "Maybe," says NMI, "the greenest product is the one you don't buy." Seventy percent of consumers report that instead of replacing products, they're mending and repairing things and this statistic is something to celebrate in the scheme of sustainability, but it's also a sobering thought for our product-based economy.

Echoing the NMI findings, a United Nations' report titled, *A New Era of Sustainability—UN Global Compact-Accenture CEO Study 2010*, surveyed nearly 1,000 CEOs, business leaders, members of the civil society and academic experts about how well they think the sustainability movement has done thus far and their predictions for its future. The result? Not enough is being done. In fact, the report says what is needed is a "quantum leap in corporate sustainability action." While thousands of firms around the world have committed to corporate sustainability,

the report makes clear that "we are far from a critical mass," adding that there is not the "depth of action needed to right the course and adequately address the world's most pressing challenges—poverty, climate, energy, water shortages and food security, as prime examples." While consumers don't hold businesses solely accountable to fix these challenges, there is a clear expectation that businesses do their part. Consumers need to trust that business—and the products business makes—can alleviate, or at a minimum not worsen, the grave crises that face individuals, ecosystems and societies. To that, both NMI and the UN reports make similar points: it is not enough to simply toss out some green or sustainable products in hopes they'll stick in the marketplace. Instead, we must pay attention to marketing basics, educate consumers about sustainability, and apply stringent internal housekeeping to enact sustainability measures at every level of the company.



In short, offering a "sustainable" product alone is not sustainable for your business. Not only do four in 10 consumers still not understand exactly what the word *sustainable*

means, according to NMI, but also consumers want to know just exactly how "sustainable" or "green" your company really is.

A green product from a green brand is more appealing than a green product from a brown brand. Consumers are craving reliable, accessible, understandable information about how to



save the environment, the planet's diverse cultures and their health. And, according to NMI, they need that information to be relevant, which is why many larger-picture topics such as carbon footprints, global warming and renewable energy aren't ringing as many bells with consumers as they once did. Businesses today have to do a better job around sustainability by giving consumers information that *helps* them (and doesn't overwhelm them), by producing products that are pertinent to their needs, and by showing consumers that the company's own commitment to sustainability runs deep (no greenwashing allowed!), not just through the company but also throughout its supply chain and the products' lifecycle chains.

In the world of commerce, long-term sustainability is a social contract between business and society - including consumers - one that can only be accomplished when sustainability-committed firms "drive sustainability issues deeper into operations and strategy" and when they take steps to embed these principles into their strategies, operations and throughout their supply chains, says the UN report. NMI agrees, saying that more than half the U.S. population prefers to purchase products made in an environmentally friendly and sustainable way, and that supply-chain management is an increasingly important part of the sustainability economy.

If you haven't already, assess your management and employees and the corporate board that sets strategic direction for your firm. To work effectively within an organization, sustainability has to be a top-down—as

well as a bottom-up—initiative. Having a sub-committee or an individual charged specifically with oversight of sustainability efforts throughout the corporation can make the difference for success, according to the U.N. report, that also suggests we make it our goal to "[establish] good sustainability practices so that they become benchmarks for investor decision making."

Balance the greening of your products with that of your business, says NMI, and think beyond the traditional, targeted LOHAS consumer populace into the mainstream population. New segments and demographics are now stimulating the growth that we're seeing in the LOHAS marketplace. "Gen X now has the same proportion of LOHAS consumers as the Boomers," says Steve French, NMI's managing partner. Think beyond your normal market boundaries: U.S. companies are in a prime position to take a global lead in the sustainability marketplace--as producers, sellers, mentors and partners with developing sustainability markets and business environments. In fact, NMI reports "hundreds of millions of LOHAS consumers" are emerging in the economies of China and India alone.

So, while the recession makes consumers and companies sensitive to spending--and while many marketers are winnowing out pieces of the sustainability picture that they think are expendable--consider this: NMI's research shows that 80 percent of the population is green in some way, despite differing motivations. Our job is to get back to the basics of producing good products that are truly and helpfully sustainable, and persuasively communicating their benefits –

immediate and long-term – to mainstream consumers and help them understand how sustainability can impact their future, and the future of the planet.

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This article is adapted from one that \ originally appeared in the July/August 2011 issue of Natural Products Association Now.