



HONDO GREEN™

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Five Key Components of Effective Green Messaging

by: Courtney Kleefuss

A discussion of the "Five Key Components" affecting the believability and impact of communications efforts centered around promoting and publicizing corporate "greening" efforts to reduce environmental impact.

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by: Courtney Kleefuss

GREEN... from buzzword to boardroom

The term "Green" has become more than just a buzzword. What was once viewed as a passing trend by the mainstream has now become a new mindset guiding corporate business practices and the overall view of corporate responsibility.

As more and more companies are jumping on the "green bandwagon" many communications professionals are left wondering how to promote the environmentally conscious turn their company has taken in a credible and believable way.

The biggest hurdle faced by communications professionals in promoting environmental consciousness is the consumer. With the wealth of information available on TV and the Internet regarding greening practices and initiatives, consumers are better informed than they have ever been before – in all matters relating to corporate practices, not just green efforts.

Once marginalized to the fringe, consumers touting green concerns are growing in number and voice daily. Though sales numbers may not fully support this trend as of yet, it will not be long before consumers – in large numbers – begin to factor the environmental impact of the company supplying their products and services as a key factor driving purchasing decisions.

In fact, the numbers already bear out that a large majority of consumers have taken environmental concerns to heart. The 2009 Cone Consumer Environmental Survey revealed that 70% of consumers pay close attention to corporate environmental stewardship, while a staggering 85% of consumers believe companies should practice environmental stewardship constantly and consistently.

There is a growing recognition among companies and organizations that sustainability issues, particularly centered around carbon emissions, can no longer be avoided. Pressure from consumers is mounting, and as Congress, the EPA and the SEC begin to weigh in, the federal government's attention to climate and environmental impact is tightening. In addition to the federal government, sustainability and climate change-related regulations are emerging at the state, local and international levels. Beyond simple compliance to government-mandated regulations, the marketplace now expects and demands transparent, quantifiable information about an organization's sustainability efforts. The effects of going green and corporate environmental responsibility have even begun to affect major funding concerns as investors, lenders, insurers and private equity are now proactively assessing the carbon risks in their portfolios and using sustainability as a proxy for the quality of management and corporate governance in their assessments of investment opportunities.

"While challenging, the management of sustainability and climate change presents a great deal of opportunity for companies to reduce costs, enhance brand reputation, forge new partnerships, and reduce financial and legal risks," says Michael Berg, a leading advisor on sustainability strategies and communications and frequent writer and contributor on sustainability to the "Eco-Health Footprint Guide" and the forthcoming book "Climate Change: A Guide to Carbon Law and Practice."

"Consumers and employees now have a wealth of publicly-available resources to evaluate companies on sustainability and carbon performance. Perhaps the most dramatic market driver is Wal-Mart's recent questionnaire to its approximately 100,000 suppliers, asking whether they measure their Scope 1 and 2 carbon emissions and report them to the Carbon Disclosure Project," Berg added.

With the public so well informed on sustainability issues and practices, consumers are more than a little skeptical when a company begins to "wave the green banner" and position themselves as environmentally conscious and sustainable. If the proper measures and initiatives are not in place before a company announces a commitment to sustainability, the consumer backlash can be more damaging than doing nothing at all.

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The half-hearted attempts at “greening” that found much traction in the late 80’s and early 90’s – recycled packaging and biodegradable products – are seen as nothing more than “green-washing” by today’s savvy consumer. Consumers want to know what, beyond addressing the impact of a product, an organization is doing to address the overall environmental impact of doing business.

To avoid the pitfall of being labeled a “green-washer,” communications professionals need to be sure the green story a company wants to tell is one that consumers will find of value and importance. Without certain key measures and initiatives in place, the green message many companies are relying upon to boost sales and bolster brand image will fall flat when rolled out to the public.

To ensure corporate greening efforts provide a solid messaging platform, five key components must be in place before taking your message public.

Establish a Green Champion within your organization

As a standard rule of business, little gets done unless someone is held directly responsible and accountable. This is especially true when going green. Without an internal Green Champion to invigorate and excite fellow employees, any measures taken to lower a company’s carbon footprint will fall short.

When engaging in the initial phases of the greening process, many companies quickly discover that employees want to be involved. If positioned properly, the idea of going green and appointing a Green Champion will not be viewed as “extra work,” but instead will be embraced by employees as a program that benefits not only the company, but carries with it the additional cache of taking steps toward the higher ideal of bettering the environment.

The importance of establishing a Green Champion has long-term implications beyond the short-term rollout phase of greening initiatives. Without someone to champion greening efforts and communicate progress on a regular basis, greening efforts tend to lose steam and momentum. If greening efforts have been launched and significant resources have been dedicated to informing consumers, lagging green efforts will quickly become obvious to your target and undermine any goodwill and green equity your company may have built.

Going green is important, but once that message is launched to consumers, truly being green – and staying green - becomes mission-critical.

Clearly communicate green objectives internally before taking the story public

In the rush to launch green messaging to consumers, many companies neglect to fully inform one of the most important audiences – employees. Having employees informed and excited about greening initiatives will ensure that any direct contact with consumers – be it on company time or in their personal lives – will fully support the message a company is trying to leverage in the marketplace.

If the internal audience is aware of, and in full compliance with, an organization’s new green initiatives, these efforts will be rooted in a solid foundation and stand a better chance of ringing true with the external audience once the time comes to launch communication efforts centered around environmental responsibility.

Set a goal for reducing environmental impact and back it with concrete initiatives

Setting goals to reduce your carbon footprint must start with a baseline assessment of your current environmental footprint. Once this has been determined, realistic goals must be set and backed by concrete, proven methodologies to reach your goals and milestones.

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Setting and achieving these goals provides a constant communication opportunity with your consumers – a reason to establish a dialog and maintain contact on a regular basis. Though you may not be world's greenest company when first putting green plans into action, consumers and loyal customers concerned with environmental impact will view every milestone achieved as positive steps in the right direction – potentially shifting early skepticism to advocacy as your plans unfold and more milestones are conquered.

Implement methods to measure and report on the impact of your Sustainability Plan

One of the best methods for supporting a long-term sustainability plan is to measure and report progress on a regular basis. Quantifiable results are important to keep employees - and upper management – 100% behind a green action plan and any and all communications tactics that may be needed to support and publicize these efforts.

Though it is important to for a company to take credit for efforts to better the environment, believable communications can only flourish when there are real results and progress to report, backed by verifiable data.

Demonstrate a commitment to sharing truly “transparent” results with employees, external stakeholders, and the general public.

It is not enough to merely state that you are achieving the goals and milestones set forth in your company's greening plan – concerned parties need to see real data and progress before their mindset will fully shift from skeptic to advocate.

Many companies claim to have transparent results and processes when reporting their green progress. Yet when concerned parties dig deeply enough, it is often discovered that the “transparency” of these results carries an air of opacity.

Before claiming truly transparent results, be sure there is a real story to tell. And be doubly sure your results are truly transparent and readily available to those who wish to know - and see - more.

Evaluating Green Tools and their effectiveness

Just as companies are scrambling to go green, consultancies and software companies are also scurrying to develop the tools organizations will need to manage, monitor and maintain their carbon footprint. With all of these entities and individuals vying for a piece of the market, the competitive landscape gets very confusing, very quickly.

That's why when The Hondo Group began a search for the simplest, most direct path to a higher degree of sustainability – they took a different path altogether.

When The Hondo Group decided to go green in 2008, the first step was to engage Shena Turlington, a leading expert in green consultation. Turlington specializes in environmental design and sustainable business models, working with natural materials, renewable energy technologies, and ecological design principles to improve the way we interact with our environment.

Once the initial evaluation was complete and the carbon footprint of The Hondo Group was established, they found themselves asking... what next?

“There were no tools available at the time that provided us everything we needed. Nothing that could be used to measure, manage and monitor our commitment to reducing our carbon footprint,” says Lynn Balinas, President of The Hondo Group “So, we made our own.”

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Assembling a team of programming and subject-matter experts, including Turlington, The Hondo Group created a proprietary web-based program, branded the Hondo Green Assessment Tool, to address the needs they uncovered in their greening efforts.

The Hondo Green Assessment Tool is a web-based, interactive information management system that provides a simple yet comprehensive way for companies to measure, manage and monitor their environmental footprint in five key areas: travel, waste, water, materials, energy. Data is easily entered and monitored through an automated system, allowing an organization to instantaneously track the results of its sustainability efforts, no matter how large or small the organizations may be.

The reporting functionality is organized to provide true transparency of results, clearly demonstrating an organization's progress on various initiatives as well as actual cost savings and reductions in carbon emissions. Over time, data can be used comparatively across divisions within your company, various industries and even among competitors.

Recommended initiatives are automatically generated and have been proven to help a company increase profitability while decreasing its carbon footprint - allowing companies to calculate and demonstrate cost savings that result from an efficiently managed sustainability program.

So far, the feedback has been outstanding.

"We are excited to implement the Hondo Green Assessment Tool because we feel not only will it help us reduce our environmental footprint, but also share cost savings opportunities with our clients. As experienced accountants, we understand the correlation between resource management and bottom line productivity," says Scott McRuer, Founder, McRuer CPAs and customer of the Hondo Green Assessment Tool.

With the advent of greening tools like the Hondo Green Assessment Tool, communications professionals will not only have a great green story to tell, they will have the hard facts and data to craft believable and credible messages that reach, motivate and ring true with today's savvy and skeptical consumer.

ABOUT HONDO GREEN

Formed in 2009 as a specialized practice area of The Hondo Group, Hondo Green is a full-service sustainability consulting, technology and marketing firm offering any organization assistance in achieving sustainability goals by providing the tools and expertise to effectively measure, manage, monitor and market environmental impact.

Hondo Green Services Include:

- The Hondo Green Assessment Tool – An incredibly powerful, surprisingly easy web-based application that measures, manages and monitors an organization's environmental impact across five key metrics: travel, waste, water, materials and energy.
- Environmental Consulting and Training – Offering customized greening plans, proven initiatives and training programs to reduce an organization's carbon footprint and demonstrate impact with a triple bottom line approach: social, environmental and financial.
- Event Sustainability – Event planning services and methodologies to lessen the environmental impact of any event to ultimately raise event loyalty, generate new revenue streams, increase media coverage and attract new sponsorship opportunities.
- Responsibility Marketing – Creative marketing, advertising, PR, media and interactive services to ensure a client's message of environmental stewardship reaches the correct audience, stands out from the crowd and rises above the noise level.

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ABOUT THE HONDO GROUP

The Hondo Group originated as a restlessly non-conformist marketing team within JLM1926. In 2006, our corporate parent deferred to our renegade streak and granted us independence.

We then promptly rejected the narrow confines in which most marketing firms operate.

As radical innovators, we deliver unexpected graphic imagery and brand differentiation techniques. We offer pioneering professional services and unique business planning and assessment tools. We are imaginative experts, but we are also methodical: we appreciate the importance of an overarching marketing model, meticulously formulated to match your needs.

At The Hondo Group, our professionals see through the eyes of your customers. We know what works and doesn't; how to develop a consensus around a strategy; how to distribute and execute a message; when to adhere to the plan and when to be flexible; and, ultimately, how to achieve measurable results.

The Hondo Group offers:

- Strategic planning
- Brand building
- Market research and analysis
- Proactive public relations
- Internationally acclaimed creative
- Media analysis/planning/buying/tracking
- Social media strategies
- Grass roots marketing
- Event management services

The Hondo Group is everything a world-class advertising firm should be - and many things ad firms have never been.

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