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It's Not Easy Being Green
Part Two: Market Research
by Jack Miller

Last month I talked about “green” or sustainable packaging. I also talked about [Life Cycle Assessment](#), the science that attempts to measure the total environmental impact of a product or material throughout its lifespan. This month, I’ll talk about market research to measure consumer attitudes toward “green” packaging.

It truly isn’t easy being green. It’s not even easy to define “green.” Even if you are green, it’s still business, and if your customers don’t know, or understand, or care, your business may suffer.

So how do you do the research to find out what your customers think?

From my own experience commissioning and conducting market research, I’ve learned that a project like this requires two things: first, a well developed business objective, and second, a professional researcher. For best results, share the business objective with the researcher.

There are a lot of things you might want to know. Do your customers like paper or plastic? Do they think recycling is the key to sustainability? Do they understand the plusses and minuses of plastics that come from corn or potatoes? Do they understand the term “renewable”? How about “biodegradable” and “bioplastic”? Will they pay more? Will they switch brands for a greener product?

But start by asking yourself my favorite question: “Why?” Why are you doing this research?

Are you a corporation simply trying to understand the issues, or is there a specific business issue at hand?

Are you a brand company that simply wants to be more environmentally responsible, or are you trying to do something to get the attention of consumers?

Do you need to know if you can pass along higher costs? Or are you willing to absorb smaller margins if you can gain market share?

Do you need to let your customers know what you're doing to be "green"? Do you need help figuring out how to do this?

Depending on your business objective, some questions will be critical while others will be incidental or even irrelevant.

If you want to design an ad campaign, it is likely you will need quantitative research – a carefully structured questionnaire, with quotas for respondents from different groups: age, gender, geography, education level, and maybe even what stores they shop in. You want to know that x% of college educated men aged 39 and under in Minnesota will behave one way while y% of college educated women 55 and over in New York will behave another way.

You may need to start with focus groups. You might need some preliminary insights to structure your questionnaire. You might, for example, be surprised to learn that few people in certain groups are aware that plastics generally come from oil. Or you might find the need to define some terms that you thought were clearly understood, or alternatively you might need to find out how people in different groups interpret terms like "renewable" and "recyclable." In my own small survey, I was surprised to find out how poorly understood "renewable" was, even among college educated respondents.

You might use a web based survey. It is an inexpensive way to get a large number of responses, but if you don't manage it carefully, you might be more likely to get a biased sample that does not accurately represent the population at large.

If it is critical to find out whether people will pay a higher price, simply asking them may not be sufficient. They might say one thing and do another, so you will need a creative way to test this. If it is critical to find the best way to get your message to them, again, it may not be sufficient to ask them: the fact that you drink a particular brand of beer or cola does not automatically qualify you to develop an effective communication plan for your favorite brand.

Focus groups, telephone surveys, web surveys, in depth one-on-one interviews, and creative testing scenarios may all play a role – but it depends on your business objective. And, you need to balance cost versus value. You might want to slice and dice the results by region, gender, ethnicity, education level, or income level. You might want to show samples of different products and get reactions, but you can't do that by phone.

You might like to ask about generalities like global warming vs. land use issues, or even paper vs. plastics. But this all adds to the cost of the research, so you need to decide which questions are critical and which are "nice to know."

How do you decide? Ask yourself: "Why?"

Why are you doing the research? What is your business objective?

If you're interested in market research on sustainability or sustainable packaging, or simply need more information about sustainable packaging, biodegradability, or Life Cycle Analysis call Jack Miller at 203 925 0326 or email <mailto:jack.miller@market-intell.com>

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