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# Sustainable PR

AS THE FLIGHTY EXCESS of the Reagan/Bush years gives way to an era of more stolid pragmatism, who, one may wonder, will navigate the transition for us? Silly question. Public relations experts, of course. Take the environment. "The challenge," reads a Hill and Knowlton ad touting their in-house *Green Team*, "is to make the environment a distinct bottom-line advantage." Or, as *O'Dwyer's PR Services Report* explains: "Successful PR people will be those that [sic] can blend the cold-hearted reality of 1990s economics with the 1970s touching, though somewhat naive, concern for Mother Earth."

Here's how it works. In the 1970s, a company like Rockwell may have foolishly assumed it actually would have to clean up its share of 177 Individual Hazardous Substance Sites at the Rocky Flats Plant—a nuclear weapons manufacturing facility in Golden, Colorado—in order to appear environmentally friendly. Touching, but very naive. Later on, the company opted instead for a more economical demonstration of its deep commitment to the environment: an advertisement coupling the Rockwell logo to an Ansel Adams photo that celebrates the Earth in all its pristine glory. ("I saw that and went 'Ahhh!'" one Rockwell employee admits. "It seems kind of contradictory, but that's just my editorial opinion.")

The numbers show that 78 percent of American consumers have demonstrated a willingness to switch to products perceived as environmentally sensitive. Yet while the old, unsophisticated us may have assumed that adopting a pro-environmental posture would require a significant investment, the new, more cunning us knows that a deep green corporate hue can be had on the cheap, as simple as a fresh coat of paint. Does the name *Exxon Valdez* rub you the wrong way? Exxon's green consultants thought it might, so they've changed it to the more huggable *SeaRiver Mediterranean*. Same single-hulled oil tanker; new, swarthy mien. Look for it off a rocky coast near you.

Does auto exhaust get you down? Chrysler and General Motors would like to try to assuage your guilt when you buy your next Jeep or Geo by planting a tree in your name. Here's hoping this gesture fires your ecological drive: You'd have to plant another 733 trees on your own to make up for the actual amount of CO<sub>2</sub> emitted during your average 10-year car life.

So, you ask, what's wrong with luscious images of green, rolling hills, sparkling rivers, copper canyons? Why would anyone want to interfere with a good-hearted effort to bring a little nature back into the hectic consumer lifestyle? No reason, except that the Federal Trade Commission is a real curmudgeon when it comes to companies like GE marketing their regular old reduced-wattage light bulbs as "energy-efficient." They were required to cease the false claim. Also, no more will you find the upbeat three-arrow recycling logo on White Castle hamburger boxes, or the "chlorine-free process" claim on Mr. Coffee filters. Technically speaking, neither was accurate. And since Ciba-Geigy's Basus Flea and Tick Spray actually does *sort of* contain some ozone-offending chemicals, the company was wise to drop the warm and sunny "ozone-friendly" label, in



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light of activist pressure.

With the FTC and environmentalists meddling about, the eco-image business isn't the sandbox it was in the affluent '80s. "PR pros are less giddy about the growth prospects for environmental PR than they were a few years back," laments an *O'Dwyer's* editorial. But don't count savvy companies out. They may not be interested in actual ecology, but with all these communications professionals about, there's more than one way to maintain a green glow while you thin a forest.

For instance, you could, say, purchase some credibility outright. As *O'Dwyer's* details: "Cash-rich companies...are funding hard-up environmental groups in the belief the imprimatur of activists will go a long way in improving their reputation among consumers." Or, as Jim Andrews, editorial director of International Events Group, a specialist in the field, explains: "It's a trade. You give money and you use the non-profit's logo. You're almost using the cause as a form of media."

**Or try your hand** at that *SeaRiver* name game. Meet the National Wetlands Coalition—a group of such renowned nature bunnies as Amoco, Arco, Chevron, Conoco, Exxon, Mobil, Shell, and Texaco. As the name intimates, these are companies with a genuine interest in Wetlands conservation: *they want to stop it*. During the Bush administration, these faux-ecologists managed to redefine the national definition of wetlands, reducing the amount of land under federal protection by nearly 50 percent.

The Environmental Conservation Organization (ECO) is another such group with an ironic *nom de green*. Like you and me, this group of real estate developers is disgusted by erosion and pollution. "[E]fforts to save the environment," its literature proclaims, "should not *erode* fundamental constitutional rights nor *pollute* our free-enterprise economy." [italics mine]

There are many others: the Evergreen Foundation (a timber consortium); the Information Council for the Environment (coal, mining, and public

utilities); the Sea Lion Defense Fund (the Alaska fishing industry, fighting to *diminish* the Sea Lion's food sources); and a sentimental favorite from the '80s, the U.S. Council for Energy Awareness (the nuclear power industry).

And, of course, Citizens for the Environment, a "grassroots environmental group that promotes market-based methods for protecting our environment." CFE has no citizen members, per se, unless you count corporate citizens like Amoco, Boeing, Chevron, Coors, GE, GM, Georgia-Pacific, and so on. This group also lobbies against environmental regulations, using the argument that big industry always has and always will be the most pro-environmental force around.

But maybe they have a point. Perhaps DuPont Chairman and CEO Edgar Woolard signaled an abrupt corporate turnaround with his shocking 1990 pronouncement that "we subscribe to the concept of sustainable development as outlined in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development."

That same year, DuPont released their famous "Applause" commercial with penguins, sea otters, dolphins, and flamingos all clapping, flapping, and squawking joyously to Beethoven's ever-mirthful "Ode to Joy," while a narrator informs us that DuPont has just placed orders for several environmentally safer double-hulled oil tankers. "DuPont. Better things for better living."

Then again, maybe not. DuPont's announcement is touching, but shareholders should be assured that the nation's number one emitter of toxins (source: EPA, 1994) hasn't forgotten how to be cold-hearted in the lean '90s. They still dump chemicals into rivers and oceans, pump ash and other pollutants into the sky and inject toxic waste into underground geologic formations like no other American corporation. Around the time that Woolard announced his new enthusiasm for ecobusiness, he also unequivocally termed his company's 1.6 million pounds of pollution per day "safe."

*Achh.* Seems kind of contradictory, but that's just an editorial opinion.

—David Shenk

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