

Turning Green Into Gold

{ BY LISA HORN, CAS }

There's more to selling eco-friendly products than you might think. Here's what you need to know before jumping on the green bandwagon.

WITH ALL THE ENVIRONMENTAL

emphasis in the media and green items flooding the marketplace, you may feel pressured to jump feet first into selling eco-friendly products. But there's more to this niche market than meets the eye.



To find out about the challenges and opportunities the green market presents, *Promotional Consultant* spoke to four distributors who specialize in eco-marketing. While each of their business styles is different, there are some common denominators.

All have a passion for being ecologically conscious, and they practice what they preach in both their professional and personal lives. And they all emphasize the importance of being educated about not only the products you sell but also the green movement as a whole. Here is their insight so you can determine if expanding into the green marketplace is the right move for you.



than today. His clients were primarily government agencies focusing on litter control and prevention.

“I got involved with a number of departments and began to realize this [environmental products] was a market,” he says. “The situations, conditions and applications weren’t limited to the governmental arena.”

Lea hoped the environmental movement would expand into the private sector, and it finally has. “Through the years, you saw peaks and valleys of how it was received in the marketplace. Now, being environmentally conscious is here to stay. However, it’s hard to really know to what degree, as it’s a challenging time to measure sales since general purchases are down.”

If your clients have started requesting green products or if you are interested in developing your skills to cultivate green-minded clientele, Lea says you must do your due diligence. “If you’re going down this path, you must research what you’re selling, where it comes from and the history of how it was manufactured,” he says. “Also, ask yourself why you are selling green items. There must be a true benefit for taking the product to the marketplace versus selling it because this is what’s hot right now.”

If you do want to sell green for the right reasons, however, Lea emphasizes the importance of education. “If you approach a client who is serious about the environment and you aren’t educated, he or she can detect it very quickly,” he says. “You run the risk of insulting the prospect, and you could lose the opportunity.”

Here’s an example. The waste hierarchy is represented by the three R’s: reduce, reuse, recycle. Most of the products in our industry are reusable. “But if a distributor uses ‘reusable’ as a strong soliciting point and the

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Bob Lea
Owner
Target Marketing Group
Westlake, Ohio

When Bob Lea, owner of Target Marketing Group, started selling environmentally friendly promotional products more than 15 years ago, it was much different

client is entrenched and serious about the environmental cause, this tactic won’t shed a good light on the distributor,” Lea says.

And if you are asked a question and don’t know the answer, Lea says don’t even think about trying to create one. Find out the real answer and get back in touch with the client. That’s sound advice no matter what products you sell.

Patti Spadafora

Partner

Proforma Instant Promotions

Toronto, Ontario, Canada

UPIC: INST0001

Patti Spadafora and her partner, Glen Rapoport, have been selling green products for more than a decade, but there has been a significant shift in the marketplace during the past five years. And when she read “Small Moves, Big Shift,” a brief on sustainability written by one of her clients, there was a big shift in how she and Rapoport conduct their Proforma Instant Promotions business.

“Everything we do in our business has an eco-approach and sustainability aspect,” she says. “Small changes, both from a company and individual standpoint, can make a big impact. If everyone contributes a little bit to sustainability, everybody benefits from it and the world is a better place.”

important to present clients with a solution for their marketing objectives that fits within their budget as opposed to saying ‘here’s a perfect product for you and let’s try to fit it into your marketing program,’” she says. “That’s not how it works.”

Linda Gordon

Principal

Access II

San Francisco, California

UPIC: access2

In San Francisco, being a green certified business is a big deal. But this shouldn’t be a surprise. Being environmentally conscious has been a way of life for decades for those in the Bay Area.

“Companies’ commitment to the environment is a very important consideration here,” says Linda Gordon,

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It’s just as easy to present an eco-friendly product to a client as it is to show a traditional item. But Spadafora says many distributors don’t realize how many different things must be taken into account.

“Tote bags are now being made from recycled plastic bottles that have been made into nylon,” she says. “While this aspect may be green, the footprint left by the process involved in creating the fabric from the recycled products is a whole different story. For another example, I prefer selling a paper journal rather than a vinyl journal because vinyl is a petroleum product. We’re always thinking about those things, and so are our clients.”

Every promotional product manufactured leaves a footprint, so Spadafora says it is essential to be educated on all aspects of sustainability. There are many councils and associations devoted to the environment that are good places to start for an overall understanding of the issues. “For promotional products, work with your suppliers to learn how the product is eco-friendly so you can present it properly to the client,” Spadafora says.

Whether you decide to start selling green products or you stick to conventional ones, the fundamentals of creating a successful promotion are the same. “It’s more



principal at Access II. “They are very educated in the available green product choices, and the bar continues to be raised. When I call on clients today, for example, I must be prepared to talk about chemicals that a year ago I couldn’t even pronounce.”

To stay up-to-date on the issues, Gordon says she is a voracious reader. Additionally, she is a member of a number of professional organizations who regularly bring in

Francisco, they dismissed me as one of those tree-hugging nuts from California,” she says. “But now the industry is beginning to truly embrace being green. And I consider being green a direction, not a trend. As it often happens, these changes start in California, jump to New York and then spread from both coasts into the center of the country. I see this happening today.”

Now that suppliers are beefing up their green product

“Talk to your suppliers to find out what kind of documentation or certification their products have. Some of them even go several levels back into the supply chain to substantiate the claims they are making.”—LINDA GORDON



speakers at their monthly luncheons to talk about environmental issues.

Located in the center of San Francisco’s financial district, Access II’s clientele is comprised of many law offices, CPA firms and financial services companies, among others. But finding eco-friendly products for her clients hasn’t always been easy.

“As recently as three years ago when I attended tradeshows and suppliers learned I was from San

offerings, there is some confusion because there is no standardization of terms and recognizable symbols. “Some suppliers are indicating the category of environmentally friendly with their own kind of artwork that incorporates a leaf or earth graphic, but there is no standardization of what any of these symbols actually mean,” Gordon explains. “Talk to your suppliers to find out what kind of documentation or certification their products have. Some of them even go several levels back into the supply chain to substantiate the claims they are making.”

For example, natural cotton and organic cotton are not the same. “There is a big difference between regular cotton, which requires large amounts of pesticides and water, and organic cotton,” she says. “Make sure you talk to your suppliers about why their products are green so you don’t make any claims to your clients you can’t substantiate.”

Terri Yamate-Ottengheime
President
Beyond Zebra
Burbank, California
UPIC: BZI

Terri Yamate-Ottengheime has been selling green since she entered the promotional products industry in 1989. So when she started Beyond Zebra Inc. with Stacy Burleson in 2000, they built the business with a green twist.

“We have been looking into green products long before it was politically correct,” she says. “We have stayed true to ourselves and our green thinking throughout the years, continuing to pitch eco-friendly products alongside traditional items. About two years ago, we finally started getting a lot more interest in green. In the

past, green business only made up about five percent of our annual product sales. Last year, the number jumped to 35 percent.”

When moving clients away from conventional promotional products into more eco-friendly ones, Yamate-Ottengheime transitions them in stages. “There are different levels at which they can incorporate green products in their marketing, and we give them options to fit their needs, budget and brand,” she says. “If postconsumer recycled is too expensive for them, for example, maybe a product made from an organic or sustainable material is better. Or perhaps the best option is a reusable item that replaces a disposable item. But we make sure they are staying true to their brand and they are not falsely advertising a promotional product as recyclable if it’s truly just reusable. This is really important.”

While many eco-friendly products come with a higher price tag, Yamate-Ottengheime says there are benefits that offset the cost. “Green products send two messages,” she says. “Not only are companies sending their marketing messages, but the use of green promotional products also sends the message that companies are concerned about the world and the global climate. In the long run, this statement makes them look better.”

Done incorrectly, however, positioning a product as green when it truly isn’t will do more harm than good. “Technically, any product is recyclable,” Yamate-



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Ottengheime says. “However, if the infrastructure is not in place to recycle that particular type of material or fabrication, the product still ends up in a landfill even if you put it in a recycle bin.”

Yamate-Ottengheime has done a lot of research on the raw materials used in eco-friendly products, and she always has a conversation with the supplier before selling anything new. “I generally start by talking to the person who’s getting the raw materials to learn where and how they are resourcing them and to find out if they have any documentation to support green claims,” she says.

“Because I know where organic fabrications are coming from and where recycling facilities are located, I can tell if a supplier is being truthful.”

This level of knowledge has helped Yamate-Ottengheime make a reputation for BZI, and she has been asked to speak to local, regional and national groups on the subject. “Last year, I spoke to the Women’s Business Enterprise National Council about turning green into gold for their business,” she says. “Since then, we’ve also given regional talks about how to successfully green your business. We not only sell green products, but we run our business, and our lives, as green as we possibly can.” **PC**

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