Branding for the environment: The environmentally sound product

By Pierre Mare   26 Sep 2007

It is in the product's ingredients themselves that the key to a particular product's impact on the environment lie.

The previous columns discussed climate change and its impact on brands. The key elements noted were the fact that climate change is having a measurable impact, and that consumers are being driven to products that are environmentally sound of their own volition, or by regulatory processes. The manufacturing organisation has to retool to meet the demands of the consumer and regulatory requirements, obviously incurring costs that are passed on directly or indirectly to consumers. Additionally, environmental reporting is likely to become common in parallel to governance, and the organisation will be called to account for the processes and impacts of its suppliers.

This column looks at likely hallmarks of environmentally sound products. It uses the basis of consumer electronics, arguably one of the most complex products with a high impact on the environment, so a suitable model with which to begin.

One key assumption is that plastics are indispensable to modern society, so there is no point in arguing against them. Biodegradable plastics are suitable for many aspects, but probably not for medicine and certainly not for computing, so there is only a limited solution there.

The first hallmark is longevity of the entire product since the longer a product's lifespan, the less there is a requirement for disposal and subsequent pollution. A long-lived product will also reduce the burden of recycling on the consumer and/or the manufacturer.

The second hallmark is component longevity. This is closely related to the third hallmark, substitutable components. Following the idea of computing, most PCs contain similar components that are substitutable and up-gradable. The longer the life and the more substitutable they are, the lower the requirement for component disposal. This will probably translate into a reduced requirement for branded computing, but may well balance out with demand for high-quality branded components on platforms that can be easily upgraded periodically over a long time.

The fourth hallmark is energy efficiency and cleanliness. Two examples spring to mind here. A recent BBC report noted that plasma screens emit four times as much carbon dioxide and cost four times as much to run as traditional cathode ray monitors. The context of the figures was a call for tax on plasma screens. On the other hand, the One Laptop Per Child computer dispenses with conventional batteries in favour of a hand-wound generator or a foot-pump generator to recharge a battery. The low wattage design and components means that 1 minute of pumping with the foot results in 10 minutes of use. Also note that the prototype uses new, comparatively high-resolution display technology at low wattage. It may not be

coming to a boardroom near you, but it shows what can be done with ingenuity.

The fifth element relates to packaging and visual branding. Currently, computers are sold in boxes containing Styrofoam, and laptop bags are sold in plastic wrapping or in boxes. Although suppliers do need packaging to protect products while they are being transported, perhaps the packaging could be removed on delivery and returned for reuse, while the computer could be sold in a laptop bag. Reusable packaging and labelling on the product rather than separate packaging are making massive headway, driven by legislation affecting producers and consumers.

The final two hallmarks fall within the ambit of manufacturing: environmentally sound materials and processes. There are many technologies and methods in place to reduce the damage of processes, and where possible, manufacturers are beginning to substitute raw materials. Plastics remain a thorny issue. The most likely approach is to adopt a stance of conserving the ability to use them, paired with judicious use.

The cost-price trade-offs have been discussed in the previous four columns and are implicit in these hallmarks. What remains to be said is that climate change is a real threat that is making and will make its mark on brands.

ABOUT PIERRE MARE

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