

## Why Brand Veneer Must Reflect a Real Soul

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### Sustainable Branding: Five Steps to Gaining the Approval of the Environmentally Conscientious Consumer

By Greg Owsley

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"I'll admit it: I'm a sucker for a company that demonstrates it has a real soul." It was the opinion of just one individual in a focus group of beer drinkers I sat in on last year, but it inspired head nodding around the room. The moderator had posed the question, "Are a company's social and environmental values and practices a part of your purchasing decision?"



**Walking the talk:  
Further evidence that  
New Belgium Brewing  
makes sustainable  
business practices a  
core value: its latest  
campaign, featuring  
people who have found  
whimsical solutions to  
environmental  
sustainability.**

Not your typical question to ask in a beer-consumption study, but these are atypical times for any provider of goods and services.

The ensuing group banter was curious in that, instead of the cynicism of corporations we marketers have numbly come to accept, the collective point of view landed closer to optimistic than dour. Sure, these dozen consumers had their usual (and likely deserved) suspicions: faceless customer service, ethically sterile corporate behavior, spin doctoring and greenwashing. Yet, they also felt a company should and, more important, could live up to being a good citizen.

Our individual seeking authentic companies and his focus group friends-for-an-evening are hardly alone. A few months later, a survey we handed out to 612 good-beer drinkers came back with 39% claiming they actively go out of their way to support socially and environmentally responsible companies. Various studies

of a scale well beyond the scope of our regional brewery put this new breed of progressive consumers in a neighborhood as large as 60 million with plenty of space for growth as the highly philosophical Millennial Generation get their first credit cards.

#### **Burning at both ends**

These insights should come as no surprise to chief marketing officers. Living core values and marketing a product and service often find themselves as separate pursuits so as not to confuse their motives.

However, the abundance of both formal research and over-a-beer conversations with customers makes it blue-sky clear that the cautious, casual dating between core values and brand leaves both short of their optimal potential. Hence, companies are, now more than ever, charging the branding team with coming up with an effective marketing strategy by which the brand veneer can be firmly laminated to a wood core of actual practices.

While the decision to do so is simple, the execution of such branding communications requires a thoughtful, meticulous approach. Late last year and into this spring, as we at New Belgium moved from early ideation to full execution of what we call our Sustainable Branding Strategy, five guiding principles emerged. While specific to the New Belgium campaign -- which taps into New Belgium's whimsical nature while focusing on individuals and organizations making a difference -- I think these principles are archetypal enough to be applicable to any marketer seeking to raise a company's soul up to the communication platform.

### **1. Walk before talk**

The first step to gaining the approval of the conscientious consumer is far from simple but at least it's obvious: The back-of-the-house practices have to live up what you're promoting up front. Real organizational transformation has to precede the public-speaking circuit. As well, the marketing claims should be no bigger than the scope of the goodwill efforts.

### **2. Admit the flaws**

This is supplemental to the first principle. It's making sure that your homespun doesn't get construed as home spin. The greatest irony we discovered about this new customer is that he is most skeptical of the marketing directed at his progressive sensitivities. If you're going to claim natural, organic or Earth-friendly, anytime you window-dress with the idyllic, you need to be acutely aware that you've given consumers the green light to pull back the marketing curtain and inspect the premises. And they will find your authenticity shortcomings. So being prepared with answers to the tough questions or, even better, acknowledging where you have gaps between practice and aspiration, shows your consumers you're honest. Genuine disclosure is a rare corporate communication and, as we've already seen, people are generally floored when they hear it. The flaw becomes minor because they have uncovered a business enterprise more concerned with improving the core than polishing the veneer. And that's much greater proof of the company's true integrity than any tagline or slogan could ever to be.

### **3. Provide the smile**

What does all good marketing have in common? It provides optimism. This product, this service will make your life better. Thus, with values-based branding, the customer will expect a table stake of honesty while seeking, at a deeper level, hopefulness. Our modern lives can quickly be overwhelmed with a bleak outlook on the planet's health, social injustices and political discord. So a brand that can offer a refreshingly bright and sincere solution works like a salve for today's cultural tensions. For the New Belgium campaign we concentrated on how sustainability saddles a person with guilt, then asks



**An ad from New Belgium's sustainable-business campaign.**

her to pony up a slew of sacrifices. Any surprise it's a relatively empty bandwagon? While a beer maker may not be the epicenter of global warming's cause and effect, who better than a brewery to posit that sustainability doesn't have to equal abstinence?

#### **4. Go slow to go fast**

Certainly, we at New Belgium had a head start in that our philosophy and practices have been aligned since company inception, but in terms of communicating this to the market we were at the same ground zero as everybody else. A big marketing platter of a company's core values just isn't typical fodder for the consumer.

People have grown up with the full cognitive recognition that the job of marketing -- no matter how it might tug on their heartstrings -- is to persuade them to like the brand more. They know the point of the smoke and mirrors. Even in our case where we wanted our brand to work with sustainability, the issue may not be so much whether they trust the communication, but simply whether they get it. This is a new dimension to the old marketing spiel. Thus, we realized early on we needed to begin our strategy with a great deal of paced empathy for the consumer.

#### **5. Make ripples**

As a spit-size brewery in the West serving only 16 states, we knew the ripples would be more important than the splash. Regardless of scale, it's tough for any company to develop the kind of advertising, events, PR or advocacy that truly swells through culture. Yet, our early results show that with clarity of purpose, clutter-cutting creative, integration of efforts and a commitment to continuity, cultural reverberation is entirely doable. Additionally, there is evidence that cause marketing gives the communications manager a large safety net. The consumer is willing to accept edgier, more sensational information when he knows it serves a higher purpose than brand promotion. For example, Patagonia can deploy environmental-travesty shock photos like forest clear-cutting and tuna harvesting to make arresting advertising because the consumer knows Patagonia is a proven eco-leader. With truth paced by authenticity (walk before talk), transparency (admit the flaws), and optimism (provide the smile), values-centric branding can and should be dramatic in presentation.

Now more than ever, the consumer expects a shared axis for what the brand says and what the company does. Increasingly, those brands that can authenticate a cultural good standing -- as opposed to trading on hype -- are eyed with iconic-like adoration. Real soul is the new paradigm of competitive distinction, and businesses that fully embrace their citizenship in the community they serve have the opportunity to forge enduring bonds with their customers.



-**Greg Owsley** is chief branding guy, New Belgium Brewing. Previously, he was fresh markets director at an organic vegetable operation.