

Sustaining Gen Y's Interests

Capture Gen Y consumers by appealing to their environmental consciousness.

by Ellen C. Wells

Pick up the daily paper, turn on the television or visit any number of your local shops and you'll surely see that green living and sustainability are the latest hot topics. Climate change makes the daily headlines. Car manufacturers are racing to develop vehicles that operate using electricity and alternative fuels. And Wal-Mart realizes that it, too, can make an impact on the environment by offering energy-efficient light bulbs.

Where is all this interest in sustainability and green living coming from?

It may seem sustainability has suddenly appeared out of nowhere. It hasn't. This development has been a long time coming. Sustainability and green living have their roots in the environmental movement and social causes the Baby Boomers brought to the nation's attention in the 1960s. But, for the most part, the Baby Boomers' children – Generation Y or Millennials – have been raised living and breathing the sustainability message. Gen Yers – those born roughly between the late 1970s and 1995 – were reared on concern for the environment, fair employment practices and social issues that underlie the sustainability concept. It's ingrained in this generation's lives, and they promise to spread the message of sustainability with their choices – and their dollars – as they enter adulthood and the workplace.

Defining Sustainability

One of the most commonly used definitions of sustainability is “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” This concept goes far beyond growing your own organic produce and truly affects the shopping habits of those who strive to support it. A survey released by brand and marketing agency BBMG in November reports that nearly nine in 10 United States respondents identify themselves as “conscious consumers” or “socially responsible.” The report also revealed that while

price (58 percent) and quality (66 percent) were “very important” factors when making purchases, the country of origin (44 percent very important), energy efficiency (41 percent very important) and health benefits (36 percent very important) still outweighed a product's convenience (34 percent very important).

Two surveys conducted by Cone Inc., a Boston-based brand strategy and communications agency, shed some light on Gen Y's views on sustainability. Cone's 2006 Millennial Cause Study conducted in collaboration with AMP Insights found that:

- 61 percent of 13-25-year-olds feel personally responsible for making a difference in the world;
- 83 percent will trust a company more if it is socially and environmentally responsible;
- 69 percent consider a company's social and environmental commitment when deciding where to shop; and
- 74 percent are more likely to pay attention to a company's messages if the company has a deep commitment to a cause.

Cone also conducted a 2007 Consumer Environmental Survey of adults 18 years and older. When looking at the study's 18-25 age group, the survey reveals 91 percent believe companies have a responsibility to help preserve the environment, and 53 percent believe com-

About Gen Y

- Members of Gen Y were born roughly between 1980 and 1995, and number approximately 60 million.
- Gen Y's spending power is \$172 billion as an entire group, with about \$61 billion spent by young adults.
- Most are children of Baby Boomers.
- Gen Y have close bonds with their parents, and both parent and child are strong influences on each other.
- One-third of Gen Y consider themselves non-Caucasian.
- Gen Y has a strong affinity toward multiculturalism and willingness to experience the non-familiar.
- 25 percent live with just one parent in the home.
- 75 percent of Gen Y has been raised with a mother working outside the home.
- Generation Y is the first generation to be fully immersed in the Internet and technology.
- Have a strong sense of social responsibility.



panies can help support the environment by communicating their environmental efforts to consumers and employees. This group is indeed laying down the green to make environmentally friendly purchases, including products with recycled content (34 percent); energy-efficient home improvement products (29 percent); and cleaning supplies (30 percent).

One other important statistic revealed by this Environmental Survey is that 83 percent of this group would consider switching to another company's products or services if they found out about a company's negative corporate responsibility practices. This isn't relegated to large corporations emitting waste into rivers. A garden center's growing and managing practices that emit fertilizer-laced effluent or use water inefficiently could also fall under this category.

Alison DaSilva, vice president of Cone's Knowledge Leadership and Insights group, says these surveys show the Millennials have a heightened environmental consciousness compared to generations preceding them. "They are incorporating green into their daily lives through support of environmental causes and other activities, and they expect companies to have a credible environmental strategy in place, as well," DaSilva says. She explains that Millennials are a savvy group and will see a difference between companies whose messages are aligned with their commitment and those that are "promoting green" to "draw them in." "More and more, consumers are conscious of greenwashing, and they will punish companies they believe to be irresponsible, just as they will reward companies they trust with their loyalty and dollars," DaSilva says.

Gen Y And Garden Retail

As 'tweens, college students and mid-twentysomethings, Gen Y has yet to become a significant market segment for garden centers. So why should garden retailers put "promote sustainability to Gen Y" on their already long to-do lists?

For Charlie Cole, a Gen Yer and manager of Cole Gardens in Concord, N.H., Gen Y's interest in sustainability will be a lifetime commitment. He points to the auto industry's investment in developing fuel cell and hybrid technology as an indicator that other industries believe this, too. "They are piling tons of money into this, not just because it's a fluke but because they think it's going to stay

around," Cole says. "You and I don't have to do the research on Gen Y. The big corporations are doing it for us and proving that the sustainability issue is something that's going to stay."

With a spending power of roughly \$172 billion, Gen Y isn't just spending its own money, but is also influencing their parents' spending habits. "The younger Millennials born in the '90s are a really important influence group," says Annie Gardiner, executive director of the VeriFlora Sustainability

Council, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to advancing environmental sustainability, social responsibility and product quality in floriculture. "Say you have a merchandising program that lets consumers know the plants on this stand are, for example, VeriFlora certified, and you communicate the message that VeriFlora is about the environment, it's about people and it's about quality," says Gardiner. "If the parent isn't convinced or is comparing options, it's the child who is more aware of en-




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vironmental issues and who can influence the decision to buy.”

Gardiner sees sustainability and its three-point message – about people, the environment

and quality – as the next major claim in the marketplace. “I can’t tell you that all Millennials understand the three-point message, but I can say that the word sustainability resonates with them,” Gardiner says. “It means something that’s in alignment with their values. They move toward it and want to know more.”

“(Gen Y is) acutely aware of their marketing power and influence, and they have money and are willing to spend it,” says Cone Inc.’s DaSilva. “Whether or not they shop today, they will be paying attention to the messages, and it will influence their shopping and employment decisions in the future.”

Concerning the older Gen Y segment, those in their mid-twenties, Gardiner points out that as they settle into their first homes, they will want to align their landscape purchases with their values around sustainability.

Cole agrees. “They just haven’t been ready to garden,” he says. “When they are ready, they are going to care about sus-

tainability and organic products.” And as an independent garden center manager, Cole is acutely aware that he’ll have to win their loyalty before the box stores do.

Ways To Reach Them

Cole is drawing attention to eco-friendly products in his store like Espoma and Bonide with a sticker that says, “Earth-Friendly Product,” accompanying a Cole Gardens logo. While not designed specifically to attract Gen Y, the label, he hopes, grabs the attention of anyone looking for these products.

Because Gen Y is so comfortable using the Internet and new multimedia technologies, these can be employed to communicate a company’s sustainability message to this demographic. “This group has the creativity, the energy and the technology to communicate about (sustainability),” says Gardiner. These new communications methods will hit their target, “as long as people who have a sustainability message to communicate are using the tools” that Gen Y is engaging with, she adds.

The Cone Millennial Cause Survey indicates Gen Y is accustomed, through these new technologies, to instantaneous feedback and gratification, and can be-

come frustrated if they do not immediately see the results of their efforts. Cone suggests companies take advantage of these new communications tools to let Gen Y know their role as part of a solution. For garden retail, this could be an interactive Web site that informs consumers about different product purchases and their effects on the environment.

On the other hand, perhaps too much attention is being paid to luring Gen Y at the wrong time for a number of products they don’t need at this age. A November AdvertisingAge.com article about marketing to Millennials indicates that 18- to 24-year-olds represent less than 10 percent of the population. “We get on a roll about what to do for Gen X, Gen Y, for the 45- year-old woman,” says Doug Cole, Charlie Cole’s father and owner of DS Cole Growers, Loudon, N.H. “If we can touch on some of these things, that’s great. But let’s not put too much energy into any one segment, or we might forget about some basic psychological issues that draw people to displays.” TGC

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