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Looking to Rejuvenate Your Brand? Try Sustainable Innovation



Intentionally or not, many recent product improvements have been inspired by sustainability-related innovations in product and communications. One excellent example? Witness the case of Millicare, a textile and carpet cleaning product with an unexpected side benefit: improved indoor air quality. By Jacquelyn A. Ottman

Register now for [Sustainable Brands '07](#) to hear The Moderns founder Janine James speak about her leadership in re-positioning the Millicare brand.

Back in 2002, Janine James and colleagues at The Moderns, a New York branding and design firm realized that the Millicare product had a strong environmental attribute: its unique, powder-based formula that encapsulates dirt and toxins that are then vacuumed up and removed from the site. This unique feature results in improved indoor air quality when used with certain HVAC systems.

James antennae suggested the time was ripe for such a product: consumers were becoming increasingly concerned about the cleaners they use, examining labels in search of toxins that could aggravate lungs and create poor indoor air quality. There was also a merging of attitudes towards the perceptions of air quality in homes, offices and hotels; standards that applied to one were more and more carried over to the others.

At the time, the U.S. Green Building Councils LEED certification system addressed off-gassing from carpets, furniture and paints; surely James prognosticated, cleaning products with their ability to positively influence indoor air quality, would be next.

A campaign and sustainability-oriented positioning was born: Position Millicare as the leader in green maintenance. Support with its unique indoor air quality attribute coupled with the compostability of the end product, thus closing the loop from product manufacture to end-of-life.

But how to address the fact that employees are not typically present in the evenings when carpets are cleaned? James and colleagues tackled this challenge by including in the campaign some direct to employee communications like the one they co-branded with employee-recruitment and retention-oriented Bank of America that said, Sleep well knowing your floor is being cleaned by Millicare. Employees returned to their desks in the morning to find chocolates, a tangible reminder of the care that was taken to clean their offices overnight.

This campaign has won numerous awards including top prize at [Rebrand 100](#) two years in a row.

Chances are your own brand can benefit substantially by viewing it through a sustainability oriented lens. There may be sustainability benefits that can be targeted to various aware consumer segments, or product improvements that can enhance brand relevance in these green-oriented times.

To begin to take your brand along a sustainable route, ask these three questions:

1. Do we have a business model that informs innovation? Is our innovation process multidisciplinary in nature so that product and communication innovation proceed simultaneously? Holistically collaborating on a creative brief ensures that

greenwashing is avoided as can happen when communications moves faster than genuine product innovation.

2. Are you prepared to change the way your category works? Perhaps unknowingly, Apples iPod represents one of the greenest products around. Instead of CDs and the controversial jewel cases that once housed them the iPod uses digital technology and a revolutionary new business model to make thousands of tunes available to music lovers at a fraction of the environmental footprint.
3. Are you prepared to stay in the forefront of sustainability? Apple has been under heavy target by Greenpeace for manufacturing iPods with heavy metals such as brominated flame retardants and polyvinylchloride that competitors have already replaced. They risk being replaced themselves on the leadership radar of savvy consumers looking for superb product performance and environmental quality.

The lessons learned in managing the Millicare brand are mirrored in other sustainably-managed brands and they can be used by all brands to inspire their own rejuvenation efforts.

*Jacquelyn Ottman is president of **J. Ottman Consulting, Inc.**, a New York-based firm that advises businesses on positive strategies for eco-design, eco-innovation, and green marketing. Clients include Nike, GE, IBM, and the U.S. EPAs Energy Star label. She is the author of **Green Marketing: Opportunity for Innovation, 2nd Ed.***

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