

When green is all there is to be



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At Acxiom we often find ourselves asked for a Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) statement as part of a client proposal. The World Commission on Environment and Development defines sustainability as 'forms of progress that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.' In more simple terms, as we strive for sustainability we aim to reduce our waste, emissions, and the resources we consume in order to lessen our impact on the earth.

IT WAS KERMIT THE FROG WHO FAMOUSLY SANG, "IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN." EASY OR NOT, THE CONCEPT OF GREEN HAS SHIFTED FROM THE LATEST BUZZWORD TO AN ACCEPTED, AND EVEN AN EXPECTED, STATE OF BEING FOR MANY ORGANISATIONS. ACXIOM'S JOANNE DOUGLAS BELIEVES THAT SUSTAINABILITY IS MORE THAN JUST ABOUT THE FEELGOOD FACTOR—IT MAKES BUSINESS SENSE TOO.

Large and small corporations across all industries are releasing Sustainability Reports and Environmental Action Plans with corporate responsibility a key part of their long-term vision. Some are even going so far as to demand the same from their suppliers by developing corporate social responsibility requirements and following green purchasing guidelines that have been developed internally.

The development of ratings systems,

such as the Corporate Responsibility Index, the Dow Jones Sustainability Index and the Climate Disclosure Leadership Index, has gone a long way to making green mainstream. The Australian Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility predicts in its report *The State of CSR in Australia: 2009 Annual Review* that the reduction of environmental impact will be the number one priority for company managers in 2010.

As environmental debates continue to rage around the globe, most of us have embraced the concept of eco-friendly to some degree in our private lives. We recycle, switch off unused lights or appliances and are vigilant about water wastage.

Making a case for caring

To ensure that a corporate sense of responsibility is more than staking out the moral high ground and contributing to the problem of global warming by blowing hot air, businesses are seeking genuine and

meaningful ways to improve their environmental footprints. The ways in which they do this may vary, from reducing power consumption, general wastage and emissions, down to becoming more responsible in their day-to-day business practices, including sales and marketing operations.

Before I launch into what we, as marketers, can do, for a different perspective I asked Acxiom's IT manager, who happens to be one of the most environmentally conscious people I know, where she thinks the future of corporate sustainability lies. In her opinion, true sustainability goes hand in hand with real accountability, and we are most incentivised to be green when it hits us in the hip pocket.

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She approached Acxiom about 'virtualising', a process whereby we maximise server space to streamline infrastructure and business processes, and reduce the need for cooling. While this is clearly a sustainable strategy, substantial cost savings also result from that power reduction, and I have my suspicions that those financial benefits considerably tipped the decision-making process in favour of implementation.

The bottom line is that sustainability makes good business sense, and this is no less true when you come to evaluate your sales and marketing processes. In the world of marketing it sometimes seems that it is already challenging enough to obtain a clear picture of who needs your products and services and to dream up creative ways in which to convince your audience that they should commit to a purchase. It would be crazy to demand an increase in efficiency with an eye to improving sustainability if, when you place environmental concerns to one side, it didn't make such good business sense. It's the same across the board; when you reduce waste, you positively impact your bottom line.

Efficiency is eco-friendly

General marketing material, and direct mail in particular, forms a comparatively low percentage of total of household

waste. Yet how often have you pulled misdirected or irrelevant circulars from your overflowing mail box and muttered something pithy about dying rainforests? The much-heralded arrival of digital and email marketing as core elements of any multichannel strategy may go some way towards downplaying direct mail's perceived environmental impact, but while it is largely unsolicited and often duplicated or inappropriate due to poorly managed customer data, direct mail will maintain a high profile.

Organisations have already taken strides to improve their customer data quality. By maintaining a current and accurate customer database they reduce the direct mail and marketing wastage for which they may otherwise be held accountable.

But sustainability is not solely an issue for direct mail, or whether you use environmentally friendly marketing materials in your campaigns. The overall efficient use of resources in sales, marketing and CRM requires thorough, up to date and relevant knowledge when it comes to targeting your messages.

This goes further than consistent maintenance of your customer mailing lists to reduce duplication and undeliverable mail. There are a number of suppliers you can choose to partner with in the production of your materials who can actively contribute to the sustainability process of direct mail. In addition to utilising recycled and recyclable consumables for a direct mail piece, a number of clever direct mail techniques that exist on the market today allow you to forgo sending both mail piece and envelope in your campaigns. As an added bonus, they are often creative enough to achieve the coveted target audience cut-through that marketers seek.

Putting it all on the line

In 1994 a UK strategic management consultant with a commitment to environmental sustainability, John Elkington, coined the phrase *triple bottom line* (TBL) to describe a range of values and criteria suitable for measuring economic, ecological and social success. TBL was later ratified by the United Nations and has become the standard for reporting ecological footprint.

Elkington's three-step approach, also known as the 'three pillars' of people, planet and profit, requires that an organisation be accountable to stakeholders, being anyone either directly or indirectly affected by the business's actions, rather than to shareholders alone. Under this theory, an organisation is held responsible for

maximising more than profit.

Encouraging a view that is broader than the bottom line may not appear on the surface to make sound business sense. But when the implementation of sustainable strategies positively impacts bottom line results, surely everybody wins—including the planet.

As we move forward, it could easily be the savings that come as a result of our efforts to integrate more environmentally sound strategies into our business and marketing plans that earn us greater attention and support from management. Our online products, for example, bills and statements, that ostensibly reduce our own paper consumption and mailing costs, offer the added advantage of providing the customer a swift and convenient way of accessing necessary documentation. It also empowers each individual customer to feel that they are contributing in their own way to the reduction of corporate Australia's environmental impact.

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Without a doubt things are changing, and we are more and more often being asked to view the world through green-tinted glasses. How far will this trend take us? Could the four 'Ps' of price, product, place and promotion that have long been the cornerstones of the marketing mix eventually become the three 'Ps' of people, planet, and profit?

When all is said and done, I don't know what the future holds. It would, however, please me to think of my son, who so loves to watch the Muppets on Sesame Street growing up in a future that is fundamentally greener. It is comforting to think that we may reach that point when we can echo the satisfied words of our friend, Kermit: "I am green, and it'll do fine..."

In fact, it will do better than fine. ☉

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