

PRODUCT, PRICE, PLACE, PROMOTION ... AND THE PLANET

BY PETER CLARKE

There's an old proverb that says, "It's better to be a dog in a peaceful time than be a man in a chaotic period." Right now it doesn't matter whether you're man or dog because the confusion that exists around sustainable design affects every species on the planet.

Those of us fortunate enough to live in developed nations have an incredibly high standard of living compared with the rest of the world. Because of our privileged good luck, we have a profound responsibility to ensure the way we live does no harm to others, nor risks the future of planet Earth. This responsibility falls upon individuals, businesses and governments.

Moving forward

Right now, we're emerging from the "Is the problem real or not?" phase. As this way of thinking falls behind us, and we all agree that climate change is one of the gravest issues we face, we can move forward with action plans that, ideally, have been carefully considered.

We face the difficulty, however, that if we rush into short-term changes that are not based on clearly understood criteria we risk making the problem significantly worse. It's ironic that some of the knee-jerk packaging initiatives currently making news could ultimately have the opposite effect of their intended benefit.

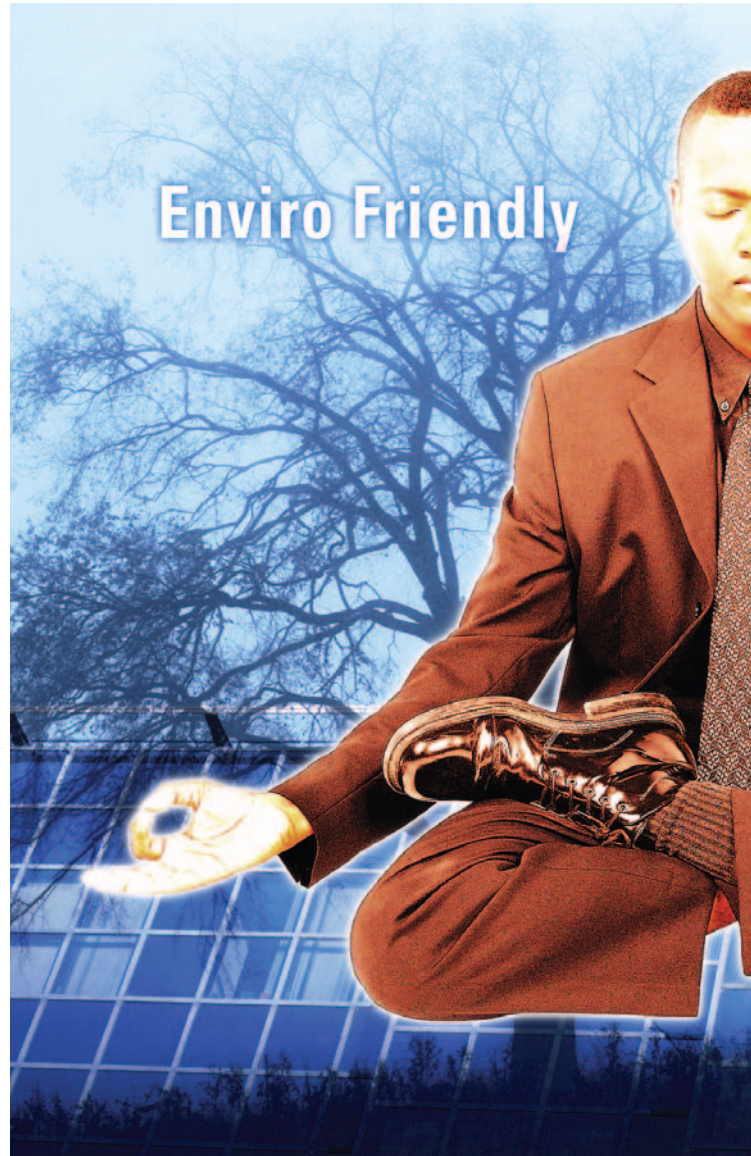
Take, for example, the city of San Francisco's decision to ban the familiar plastic supermarket bag in favor of its paper equivalent. Paris has already made the same decision, and the city of New York is now considering it. The legislation is largely based on regional or local issues—litter, for example—and ignores larger, more global agendas.

Let's compare the manufacturing impact of paper versus plastic bags. Manufacturing paper bags emits three times more greenhouse gases. Paper pollutes 26 times more volume of water. And making paper consumes twice the energy of making plastic.

Of course, there are other issues to consider; among

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them, the fact that petroleum-based plastic bags deplete a precious non-renewable energy resource and that paper bags are biodegradable. The point is that there are a wide range of criteria that must be balanced before decisions, which, in the short term, may appear attractive but are clearly full of contradictions, can be made.

The responsibilities city legislators face are just as impor-

tant as the ones in front of brand owners and retailers. After all, manufacturing plays a vital role in our economic development.

Wal-Mart's sustainability scorecard takes a step toward establishing some guidelines for brand owners. The goal is to get a good scorecard rating while at the same time grow the brand's competitive position in the marketplace. However, the scorecard's metrics lean toward utilitarian and functional

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are cost-effective and convenient—at least, for right now.

And, to make things worse, we're now seeing some brands "greenwash" consumers, over-hyping their initiatives and building misconceptions with inaccurate data.

Consumers who actually seek out environmentally friendly products and packaging have additional challenges. These consumers often think they're doing the right thing but it's not clear that they really are. They often don't understand which choices truly are environmentally friendly; for instance, when it comes to the environment, they are most aware of the need for the proper disposal and recycling of products.

But brand owners who are delving into sustainability are realizing that materials, manufacturing processes, energy consumption and transportation issues represent areas of even greater global importance.

So, the challenge is to coordinate the sustainable criteria—for both consumers' and brand owners' interests—with the economic needs of the brands. The goal is to improve performance of sustainability metrics without eroding brand values. We can even take this a step further: the high-level goal is to meet the sustainability metrics and enhance the brand.

How do we do it? We have to ensure that we meet sustainable criteria and deliver the brand experience for the consumer in a truly compelling way. This is not entirely new. It's the role designers have played for decades, and they're especially well qualified to do it. In addition to the sustainability scorecard, we also need a brand experience scorecard. Together, our responsibility to the planet is balanced with economic development and growth.

Designers understand how to integrate the technical complexities of performance and function with the emotional needs and wants of the consumer. Working in close partnership with researchers, designers use a range of research tools to uncover the key must-haves, nice-to-haves and not-so-important proposed features of packaging initiatives. Coupling this strategic insight with knowledge of the characteristics of materials and manufacturing processes enables designers to achieve this difficult balance.

However, we need much more knowledge and information in order to build a complete picture and make recommendations that take all of the factors into consideration. We need to educate the decision-makers and ensure that knee-jerk reactions are relegated to history. **BP**



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Brand Experience

concerns, so brand owners may quickly overreact to comply in an attempt to win shelf space.

The consumer's perspective

In research, consumers say they want to make choices that are responsible and environmentally friendly. But the reality is that consumers actually buy products and packaging that