



DEDICATED TO MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Trend drives retailers, consumers to go green

Greenwire, 23 January 2008 - As more consumers are looking to expand into the eco-friendly realm, retailers around the country are taking notice and trying to fill the gap.

The Greenwire logo consists of the word "Greenwire" in a green, sans-serif font, enclosed within a thin black rectangular border.

Smaller stores are turning eco-consciousness into a boutique business, while big-name brands such as Clorox are going green on shelves nationwide.

The trend reflects a nation that is increasingly aware of environmental issues. According to a study, "Moving Consumers from Green Interest to Green Action," released last week by Insight Research Group in partnership with HGTV and the Natural Resources Defense Council, 40 percent of consumers say they are more aware of environmental issues now than they were in 2006 and 81 percent think the current focus on green issues is here to stay, rather than a passing fad.

"Until now, the communication around environmentally friendly lifestyles has been focused on an all or nothing approach, but this study shows that consumers want to understand the full spectrum of green activity -- from choosing eco-friendly building and design products to recycling or using alternative forms of energy," said Jim Samples, president of HGTV, in a press release.

As a result, retailers are finding that what was a niche market is becoming more mainstream, leading independent retailers to venture into "green" business in the hope of capturing part of this evolving market, changing the face of environmentalism in the process.

As more of the news cycle focuses on environmental issues, from climate change to lead-tainted toys and soaring energy prices, many people are making changes in their lives that will help protect their families and the environment, according to Daniel Velez, a 33-year-old entrepreneur who recently opened [Greater Goods](#), a store in Washington, D.C., that sells environmentally friendly gadgets and other household goods.

"I think it'll become more normal to have energy-efficient, environmentally friendly stuff," Velez said. "Probably moms worried about kids getting poisoned will drive manufacturers to look for safe products, and the cost of energy will drive energy-efficiency into mattering."

Jason Holstein, president of Maryland-based Amicus Green Building Center, a store that touts itself as "one-stop" shopping for environmentally friendly building materials, said Amicus was created because of a hole in the market.

"There was nothing else in the market like us," Holstein said about the store's opening about two and a half years ago. "We went to fill that need."

One of the reasons the environmental movement has taken off in recent years is the convergence of greater media coverage and the availability of more green goods in the marketplace, according to Alex Kennaugh, director of marketing for NRDC.

"People are becoming more aware and are better informed about how all issues are interconnected," Kennaugh said. "At the same time, there are more offerings. You have convenient, [good] quality and affordable options out there now; no longer do you have to give up these things."

Velez said he came up with the idea for Greater Goods in February 2006 after thinking about the war in Iraq, the cost of oil, energy dependence and global warming.

"I was seeing the way the world was changing -- the changes to America that the cost of energy brought," he said. "People are more willing to listen to high energy costs than to people talking about global warming. Right now, we're at the beginning of a new version. We've gone from awareness to engineering; taking what we're worried about and doing something about it."

When deciding how to stock his store, Velez said he chose products he liked and targeted areas where he thought people could have the biggest impact: cleaning products, water-use reduction and energy saving.

"Although [cleaning products] don't always seem like a big deal, it's a big step forward to make things that don't poison the water you're drinking," he said. "Energy savings is like free money. It's almost like lending money to yourself. When's the last time you got a rate of return on your bathtub or stove?"

Velez, a self-described "break-it, not fix-it kind of guy," got the idea for the store after making his own home more

energy efficient.

"I enjoy gadgety stuff, but I wanted gadgets that did something useful," he said. "It was cool -- I was able to change my electric bill by experimenting. I put light bulbs on timers, experimented with remote controls and insulated the windows."

Greater Goods is a representation of its owner's belief that in order to successfully address the issues facing the world, it is important to be clever about the environment and make people want to change their lifestyles.

In that vein, the store boasts a variety of products for all areas of life. There are biodegradable plastics and sustainably grown wood gates. Customers looking to reduce their water consumption can buy a showerhead that claims to conserve water and energy. Those looking for something bigger can get a tankless water heater or solar arrays.

Greater Goods also partners with several organizations to implement various technologies. It works with Chesapeake Solar to install solar panels and D.C. Greenworks for green roofing. (The store itself models two green roofs above each of its bay windows.)

Smaller retailers aren't the only ones to notice the increased demand for eco-friendly goods.

Wal-Mart Stores Inc., the nation's largest retailer, has launched several initiatives aimed at greening its stores, including measuring the energy used to procure, manufacture and distribute products throughout its supply chain as part of a broader effort to curb the company's use of nonrenewable fuels (*Greenwire*, Sept. 24, 2007).

And Clorox Co., most known for its bleach product, is adding a series of natural, biodegradable household cleaners called Green Works, the first major consumer products firm to launch such a line. Clorox also last year bought Burt's Bees, a company known for its products made from beeswax, as a part of its initiative to move into sales of green products.

Pocket book issues

While green retail is gaining a foothold nationwide, whether the trend represents a bigger fundamental shift in eco-consciousness remains to be seen.

A report released last summer by the Seattle-based Hartman Group found that many consumers feel they can control what happens in their households, which directly influences what they buy and helps to explain why people are buying more sustainable products like organic food and natural household cleaners. The report concludes that a "cultural shift is taking place in terms of consumer awareness, acceptance and practices that relate to sustainability measures."

However, professor Allan Schnaiberg, professor emeritus of sociology at Northwestern University, cautions against reading too much into the increased focus on the environment.

"I'm a little skeptical," Schnaiberg said. "I've watched interest in organics rise and fall."

But, he said, what people do respond to is pocket book issues, like higher energy costs and health concerns. He said those issues get wrapped up in the environmental mantra but are distinct movements.

Schnaiberg said that while he sees something changing in society in terms of environmental consciousness, he emphasized that it remains to be seen how long-lasting and profound the changes are, saying that while many people are treating the trend as changes at a structural level, he thinks the changes might be more "lip-service" that leaves the structure virtually unchanged.

"The environmental movement in the last decade has talked sustainability, but if you look closely, we don't do much about it," he said. "In this society especially, there is a gap between talk and action."

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