

Understanding Green Marketing and Advertising in Consumer Society:

An Analysis of Method Cleaning Products

AUTHOR:

Tanya A. Ryan, Winona State University

ABSTRACT:

This study attempts to understand green marketing and advertising in consumer society, with specific regard to Method cleaning products. The study uses rhetorical analysis to examine both the copy and the visuals of various marketing communication pieces published by Method, and via the application of agenda-setting theory, reveals that Method may be putting forth a socio-political agenda invoking a green consumer-citizen. The findings will inform consumers and practitioners both of the potential implications of green marketing communications.

“Companies like Coca-Cola, General Electric, General Motors, Macy’s, E. W. Scripps, Toyota and Wal-Mart are clambering aboard a bandwagon painted green, festooned with flowers and powered by an engine that runs on biodiesel fuel.”

-Stuart Elliot, *The New York Times*, March 27, 2007

Stuart Elliot’s comment in *The New York Times* begs additional comment as well as questions. Why? Why are companies “clambering aboard” the “green” bandwagon? Why do companies even care about the environmental movement? The cynic asks, ‘what’s in it for them?’ and ‘what are they trying to do?’, while the optimist sees possibilities for goodness.

Fortunately for researchers, Elliot is not the only one thinking about this issue or fueling these questions. Libby Copeland of *The Washington Post*, tried to determine why fashion brand Diesel incorporated the environmental movement into their branding regime. In her analysis of Diesel’s 2007 “Global Warming Ready” advertising campaign (see <http://bit.ly/Y5rrcF>) she concluded that Diesel was simply trying to sell clothes. Consumers seem to be “buying in” to the incorporation of social movements or “causes” into the advertising space. And as Copeland quipped, perhaps it’s because “guilt is the new black” (2007).

Companies incorporate social movements into their advertising and branding efforts for various reasons. Sometimes advertisers are simply employing a bit of popular culture in an effort to move product, other times their motives are more altruistic, but beginning in the 1990s and with a resurgence today, the incorporation of the environmental movement into advertising and branding (or use of a “green” appeal) has become almost as common as the use of a positioning strategy. As the environmental movement has increased in popularity with the masses, even more companies have leveraged it in their branding efforts.

From an active environmentalist's perspective, the environmental movement and consumerism are not usually compatible (reduce is the first "R" in "reduce, reuse, recycle"). However, when marketers either see an opportunity to appeal to an emerging target audience, or they feel the desire to become a part of the movement, the two worlds collide. What implications does this collision enact?

This article argues that the role of advertising is shifting. Advertising no longer only projects a fantasy world that consumers aspire to become a part of; nor is advertising simply informing consumers of new products. On top of material lifestyle aspirations and information, today's advertisements are being utilized via Agenda-Setting as socio-political tools where private companies are incorporating social issues, such as the environmental movement, into their advertising messages. This study presents a rhetorical analysis of advertising and branding efforts by Method Products (an environmentally conscious cleaning product company) and discusses the implications of Method's branding discourse, but also hypothesizes and calls for additional research on the impacts of the surge in "green" branding and advertising efforts in general.

The purpose of this study is to use one brand, Method, to provide a snapshot of how a brand that is considered a leader in sustainability is portraying the environmental movement and encouraging consumption. The overall aim of the study is to examine what environmentally conscious brands are really telling us through their green advertising and marketing.

Literature review and research question

There is no question that the environmental movement is a prominent social and political issue today. Mass communication and marketing scholars have been studying

“green” appeals in strategic communication for decades. However, current and prior advertising researchers have tended to focus on classifying consumers, and determining if “green” appeals have the ability to move product. This study is different and important because it looks at advertising as more than just a business tool. This study considers advertising to be a method of mass communication not merely reflecting society, nor introducing new products, but putting forth a socio-political agenda.

Advertising and Society

Advertising and its impacts on society have been studied from a historical perspective –that is not new. Roland Marchand, Jackson Lears and Juliann Sivulka have looked at advertising, each from a different perspective, in an effort to determine its meaning and place in American society. Consistently they have concluded two observations. First, that advertising is a teaching tool, which has helped shape American culture, and second that advertising is a method of fantasy or escape that can produce desire for goods as well as display the pleasures of consumption.

Over the years, advertising has taught Americans about new products, inventions and technologies, and showed consumers how to fit them into their ordinary lives (Sivulka 1998). Advertising has also taught consumers about “appropriate” behaviors, often showing women how to act as wife and mother, and men how to act as husband and father (Sivulka 1998). As a result of the repetitiveness of advertising, these “lessons” have impacted society and often resulted in latent functions (Lears 1994). The unintended consequences, whether they be the ideals of women as housewives, men as the “king of their castle,” white-collared business men as the most successful, “family comes first,” or the independent spirit of being an “American,” Lears concludes that certain symbols and cultural values were sanctioned through advertising messages, while others were marginalized (1994). This is obvious when we think about the ideologies presented to us time and again through the

media. Marchand's thoughts concur with Lears' observations, and set up the second observation of advertising messages on American society.

Marchand's research indicates that advertising is not a mere reflection of society (1985). In his analysis of historical advertising he observes that most advertisers defined their audiences as upper-middle class, and thus their advertising reflected as so. Blue-collar workers on the job were rarely featured in advertisements, and many significant and common cultural scenes, such as religious services and sports fans watching a game, were missing from the advertising discourse (Marchand 1985). Advertising and thus consumption were portrayed as an escape from the ordinary, and an aspiration to live the independently wealthy upper class American Dream (Marchand 1985, Sivulka 1998). Advertising over the years has focused on the economics of business, and more specifically on moving merchandise, often imploring a fantasy strategy to do so.

Marchand, Sivulka and Lears have all concluded that advertising does not simply exist as a reflection of society, and that the potential power it holds in affecting culture is great. These conclusions lead to the research question addressed in this study: As companies incorporate the environmental movement into their advertising and branding what are they really telling us?

Green advertising and marketing

The definition of "green" marketing or "green" advertising varies, but it can simply be explained (for this study) as the marketing or advertising of a product or brand through the use of environmental claims (such as environmentally-friendly, eco-safe, recycled, bio-degradable, etc) (Hartmann and Apaolaza-Ibanez 2009).

The mid 1990s produced several academic studies on "green" consumers and "green" marketing. This was because there was a shift in identifications within the general

public who began categorizing themselves as environmentalists as well as an increase in green advertising in general (noted earlier). In 1987, Pew Research Center indicated that thirty-nine percent of Americans described themselves as environmentalists, where as in 1994 that number increased to forty-three percent. The number continues to climb today, where it rests at sixty percent of Americans self-identifying as environmentalists (PEW 2010).

The 1990s are situated as the starting point of the popularity of “green marketing.” It was at this time that marketers began executing advertising that capitalized on this consumer insight/shift towards environmentalism, and advertising scholars in-turn called attention to the phenomenon. In 1995, the Journal of Advertising produced a special issue on “green” advertising. Several articles examined topics including a profile of the new “green” consumer. According to Shrum, McCarty and Lowery, consumers who tend to buy “green” products (specifically women) do not have positive responses to advertising, and tend to be skeptical about advertising that uses “green” claims (1995).

A more recent “green” consumer study divides the “green” consumer into three different categories: the antihero, the environmental hero, and the anarchist (Autio, Heiskanen, and Heinonen 2009). First, the identified antihero is a consumer who realizes the tensions and contradictions in today’s society where one hand is pushing forth consumerism, while on the other is instructing us to be environmentally conscious. The antihero chooses to live comfortably and easily disassociating “himself/herself from the ideology of individual responsibility, and [leaving] the fate of mankind up to a scientific, determinist explanation” (Autio et al, 45). This attitude is the enemy of the “green” movement. The “green” movement will only survive and make progress if individuals believe that they can make a difference and that their personal consumption choices will impact society.

The other two categories of “green” consumers, according to Autio, are the environmental hero and the anarchist, both of which follow environmentalist attitudes and philosophies. The environmental hero knows that she can make a difference through strategic consumption choices (such as buying from environmentally friendly companies and by simply limiting her consumption all together), and the anarchist really wants to make a statement about environmentalism, and wants to do his part to help the environment, however sometimes he questions the impact that he can really have as an individual (Autio et al).

Other conclusions about “green” marketing include the thought that despite the growth and interest in the environmental movement among consumers, many companies do not think that the movement has matured enough to drive corporate environmentalism (Sandhu 2010). While others argue that the responsibilities associated with “green” consumerism are much too large for an individual consumer to bear, and that simply buying green products is not enough to truly impact or make a difference in improving our current environmental state (Moisander 2007).

Understanding where consumers are positioned in regards to their opinions toward the environmental movement itself is key to understanding consumer opinions regarding “green” marketing. The tie to advertising relies on determining how consumers view socially responsible brands, and second, how they view “green” advertising appeals specifically.

A 2005 study conducted by Page and Fearn investigated corporate reputations in an effort to determine if consumers really care if a company is socially responsible or not. The study found that consumers respond to “fairness” toward them, and although pushing forth a corporate responsibility campaign may not turn them off, consumers tend to appreciate brands that act in “ethical” fashions yet bring no extra cost to the consumer (Page and Fearn). Thus it seems safe to conclude that consumers appreciate ethical corporate

activities, and as long as a company is true to its word, and truth-in-advertising is upheld, companies who act in a socially responsible manner may be rewarded.

As one can see from previous scholarship on green marketing and advertising, this topic is important to understand from a scholarly perspective, a business perspective, as well as a consumer perspective. Keeping this in mind, along with the research question under investigation in this present study (as companies incorporate the environmental movement into their advertising and branding what are they really telling us?), this literature review will turn now to look at previous scholarship on socially conscious and political consumerism.

Socially conscious and political consumerism

Advertiser and consumer interest in social responsibility and environmental issues has been on the rise over the past several years. By simply looking through a magazine, or wading the aisles of a grocery or big box store, one can confirm this statement. Advertisers from automobiles to ice cream are making green claims, and consumers are seeking and buying green products. The environmental movement is not the only social issue that advertisers are promoting. Recent socially conscious scholarship includes articles on the Gap (RED) ad campaign (Amazeen 2011) which examines Gap's promotion of aids awareness, BP's Helios campaign (Smerecnik & Renegar 2010) and a case study on cotton apparel (Ha-Brookshire & Norum 2011) both of which tie into the environmental movement. These studies display the current salience of social responsibility in advertising and consumption alike.

I would like to take this moment to call attention to the connection between social responsibility and political consumption. According to Meehan, Mosco and Wasko, the "political economy has consistently focused on the process of social change" (1993 p. 107). Scammell claims that "it is no longer possible to cut the deck neatly between citizenship and civic duty, on one side, and consumption and self interest, on the other" (2000 p. 352). She

also argues that consumers continue to discover and use their political power, and I (and others) believe that corporations have begun to take note.

The combination and exploration of political issues, citizenship and consumption is not new. Much previous literature has discussed the connections. Lizabeth Cohen claims that in the midst of the Great Depression two types of consumers were identified by policy makers: citizen consumers and purchaser consumers (Cohen 2003). Citizen consumers were responsible for protecting the “good” of the nation and the safety and rights of American consumers while purchaser consumers were responsible for contributing to the economics of American society through the purchasing of consumer goods (2003). With the shift of the environmental movement into the advertising and marketing space, a reemergence of Cohen’s citizen consumer appears. Businesses that make environmental claims are encouraging a consumer who will not only protect the nation—but the planet.

In addition to Cohen and Scammell, Keum, Devanathan, Deshpande, Nelson and Shah (2004) and Jubas (2007), have also written on citizen consumption. Keum et al analyze the intersection of socially conscious and status-orientated consumption (2004) and suggest that the two do not appear to be opposing goals. I would further hypothesize that when it comes to the environmental movement, socially conscious and status-seeking consumption just may be one in the same—but that hypothesis is fit for a different study (and not currently under investigation here). To get to my final research question under investigation in the current study, I reflect on Jubas’ discussion on consumer citizenship. According to Jubas, the ideology of consumerism merges democracy, capitalism, consumption and citizenship, as if consumption “offered a resolution to social and political struggles” (2007 p. 251). In the event of the increased amount of green marketing and advertising over the past decades, it may be safe to say that capitalism, consumption and citizenship have truly collided. This leads back to my research question which has the intent

of investigating this collision: As companies incorporate the environmental movement into their advertising and branding what are they really telling us?

With the relevant literature and research question identified, this study moves forward and attempts to discuss what previous researchers have begun to explore, yet through a different lens—that of the advertiser. My contribution to scholarship is to hopefully put forth a fuller examination of green advertising, its meaning, and its intersection with citizenship and consumer society.

Theoretical framework

Agenda-Setting

Agenda-setting theory, as determined by McCombs and Shaw (1972), involves creating awareness of salient issues via the media. Most frequently applied to news media, but applicable to advertising and other forms of mass communication, agenda-setting theory is based on two assumptions: first, that the media do not reflect reality, but rather edit, manipulate and shape it; and second, that the media's concentration on specific issues leads audiences to believe that these issues are the most important to consider. If we negotiate this theory to read specifically for advertising, we would assume that an issue-driven advertisement is not reflecting reality, but editing, manipulating and reshaping it.

When it comes to news and information communication, agenda-setting theory is very well established as a media theory. In the realm of persuasive communication the application of agenda-setting theory is limited. A large handful of studies over the past few decades have set out to explore the agenda-setting role of persuasive communication, most commonly in the area of political communication. In two separate studies conducted in the 1970s, scholars analyzed public opinion polls and voter's knowledge of political issues along

side of both newspaper advertising and exposure to political advertisements (Bowers, 1973 and Atkin & Heald, 1976). In 1981, Sutherland and Galloway took the agenda-setting theory directly to the advertising scholarship concluding that advertisers set an agenda by telling consumers what products and/or values to consider, rather than to specifically consider their specific product and/or value.

In a more recent study, Kiousis explores the connections between agenda-setting and attitude (2011). According to this study, media salience is positively related to public salience and attitude strength, and, “media help people cast and form stronger attitudes about political candidates” (Kiousis, 2011, p. 368). Negotiating Kiousis’ findings, I hypothesize that media, and specifically, advertising and branding communication efforts, help people construct and forge stronger attitudes about socio-political issues.

There is no question that the environmental movement is a prominent social and political issue today. Mass communication and marketing scholars have been studying “green” appeals in strategic communication for decades, however researchers tend to focus on classifying consumers, and determining if “green” appeals have the ability to move product. As stated previously, this study is different and important because it looks at advertising as more than a business tool selling brands. This study considers advertising to be a method of mass communication not merely reflecting society, nor introducing new products, but putting forth a socio-political agenda. This area of research has been called for in previous literature, and with its tie to agenda-setting theory is under-investigated.

The overarching goal of this study is to begin to construct an understanding of the shifting role of advertising—from societal reflectors and fantasy shapers, to social and political dignitaries. In sum, this study will attempt to address the following research question:

As companies incorporate the environmental movement into their advertising and branding what are they really telling us? Method Products, an environmentally conscious cleaning products company, is the exemplar for this study. Thus, more specifically, this article asks: what message is Method Products sending in regards to the environmental movement?

Methodology

Rhetorical Analysis

Meehan et al. (1993) explain the importance of analyzing communication and the study of social change through a political economic view. This framework is helpful because the topic (the environmental movement) and data (green advertising and branding) under study include a social issue, a political movement, and capitalism. But more than that, the communication analyzed (advertising and branding materials) is overtly and intentionally persuasive. That said, when considering which method to employ in an effort to answer my research question, a rhetorical analysis was the optimum choice.

A rhetorical analysis as defined by Selzer (2004) is “an effort to understand how people within specific social situations attempt to influence others through language” (p. 281). Selzer goes on to clarify that rhetorical analysis does not only include an analysis of the literal meaning of the word language (as in spoken and written works only), but also in symbols including visual art, web sites, and advertisements to name a few (2004). Textual analysis, contextual analysis and the quantitative content analysis are similar methodologies that could have been applied to this study, however because the advertising and branding under investigation are persuasive in nature and a political economic framework was to be considered, the rhetorical analysis was most appropriate.

The company behind the marketing and promotional pieces under analysis, Method Products, was selected because Method is one of the first all natural organic lines of cleaning products to launch a national advertising and branding campaign aimed at a mass market of average American consumers.

Artifacts analyzed for this study include 1) the Method website-methodhome.com, (launch page, “people against dirty” page, our story page, methodology page), 2) a non-fiction branding book written by the founders of Method titled “*Squeaky Green*,” and 3) three advertisements from Method’s 2007 “Detox Your Home” advertising campaign. Method’s retail website was analyzed during the Spring of 2011. The non-fiction book was accessed through a local library also in the Spring of 2011. Digital copies of the “Detox Your Home” print advertisements were obtained via an Internet search on Google Images, they were accessed and analyzed during the Spring and Fall of 2011. The researcher diligently attempted to interview the founders of Method Products to no avail.

Analysis and discussion

Numerous companies over the past decade have incorporated “green” appeals into their advertising messages. From SunChips and their “solar powered chip,” and fashion brand Diesel’s “Global Warming Ready” campaign, to 7Up (100% Natural), Mentos (Fresh Picked Gum), Starbucks (Pledge to Do Some Green), Clorox (GreenWorks... naturally), Hagendas (Save the Honeybees Campaign), and just about every automobile maker and hotel chain (just to name a few). Their often authentic, and other times not so, use of “green” appeals varies dependent on the company itself and the marketing and advertising objectives.

Method Products

Method Products, a privately held cleaning supply company founded in 2000, has not only built a brand on “green” appeals and an environmentally friendly marketing message, but appears from the outside, to have built its entire company upon the environmental movement.

Founded by childhood friends Eric Ryan (a designer/marketer with experience working with brands such as GAP, Old Navy, and Saturn) and Adam Lowry (a chemical engineer and former climate scientist at the Carnegie Institution), Method boasts that it has set out to “save the world and create an entire line of home care products that were more powerful than a bottle of sodium hypochlorite. Gentler than a thousand puppy licks. Able to detox tall homes in a single afternoon” (Our Story 2011). A company worth over \$100 million, and employing over 100 people (Lowry 2009), Method’s mission, published on their website, is to inspire a happy, healthy home revolution, and to make products that work for consumers and for the planet (Our Story 2011).

According to Lowry, business is the greatest vehicle for positive social and environmental change (Opportunity Green Business Conference 2009 Speaker Bios 2009), and Method gives him an opportunity to test his theory. Ryan and Lowry believe that their combination of values, tastes and talents has made Method into the successful business that it is today. Publically they claim that they have built their business with a social mission—to do good in the world via their environmentally friendly products (Ryan 2011). This goes beyond the borders of traditional environmentalism.

“Why would you do all this green stuff and then just hang out with other greenies? That’s one of the biggest reasons why the traditional environmental movement has not succeeded. It’s not democratic,” said Lowry in an interview with Sarah van Schagen (Ryan and Lowry, interview 2008).

Their book *Squeaky Green*, published in 2008, reiterates their efforts to spread or make salient their beliefs. The introduction of the book introduces readers to the “People against dirty” whom are called to “(bare) arms” (Ryan and Lowry 2008, p. 10). The “People against dirty,” according to the Method website, “Think bottles can be role models. Lotions don't have to be scary potions. You should be able to inhale while you clean and exhale knowing that a guinea pig out there somewhere thanks you” (People Against Dirty 2011).

The people against dirty pun immediately intertwines consumerism and politics. “People against dirty” insinuates that there is an organized group of activists whom are against some form of “dirty” which is never really defined. Keeping in mind that the book, posited as a manual for greener household cleaning, is a marketing vehicle for Method, the book continues to instruct readers on how to reform themselves as a citizen of their own homes. “Dirty little secrets” are included in each chapter in which Method writers explain how other companies and products are actually hurting the environment. One example:

“Dirty Little Secret: bottled water is nasty, nasty stuff for a whole lot of reasons: it's sometimes not as clean as the free-flowing tap stuff; it's in plastic containers that may leach heavy metals into the water; and it's shipped all over the planet to get to you (which we find environmentally unforgiveable)” (Ryan and Lowry 2008, p. 58).

Another section of the book addresses plastic bags and calls for “plastic bag rehab” (Ryan and Lowry 2008, p. 65). While yet another encourages readers to simply, “Clean up your act” (Ryan and Lowry 2008, p. 91).

The language of “a call,” “forgiveness,” and “rehab” and overall “cleaning up your act” is quite reformatinal. These terms and phrases are not solely belonging to environmentalism. Taken at face value they are descriptions of behaviors tied to personal values and morals. Its website and advertising follow the same pattern. Method's 2007 advertising campaign “Detox Your Home” created with ad agency TBWA/Chiat/Day, is

similar in nature to *Squeaky Green* and uses humor in an effort to lighten the seriousness of environmental issues (including global warming/climate change, air, land and water pollution, nature and animal conservation) facing our planet today, as well as to lighten its overarching reformation ideology.

According to Francesca Schuler, Method's former Vice President of marketing, "Detox Your Home" is a "call to action to live a healthier lifestyle" (Miller 2007, 1). Method is not simply introducing their line of products, nor are they portraying a fantasy world that one would aspire to be a part of. "Detox Your Home" is a socio-political tool, teaching consumers about the environmental movement, and urging consumers to do their part. This in turn will move consumers in the direction of what Method considers to be the ideal citizen-consumer (of which the first step is to have a chemical free and, of course, clean home). Through the lens of Cohen's citizen-consumer ideology, Method becomes a link between American citizenship and the environmental movement.

The first ad analyzed in the "Detox Your Home" campaign shows a photo of a three-eyed rubber ducky, and employs the headline, "Protect your wetlands" (ad visual available at <http://bit.ly/TkDCxk>).

The body copy on this advertisement transitions from the attention getting humorous visual, to a political teaching tool. The body copy reads, "Toxic spills happen more than you think. If you use most bathroom cleaners, you're spraying toxic chemicals that pollute not just your own environment, but the planet's as well..." With its photographic style and hip use of humor, Method's advertising appeals to a target of consumers who might be minimally aware of environmental issues and products, but have an inkling that being "green" is now the cool thing to do.

In addition, "Detox Your Home" is geared toward consumers who may not be informed of the hazards of traditional cleaning product chemicals, and it sets out to let them

know that if they use cleaning products other than Method, they will not only be polluting their personal space (i.e. bathroom or kitchen) with toxic smells, but they will also be polluting the planet. Method avoids using statistical or scientific facts to support its claim, keeping the brand safely in a generic green message tone. The body copy closes with a little pull on the heartstrings, but with a humorous twist, “Because cleaning shouldn’t leave you feeling dirty.” This final claim has dual meanings—a literal translation of the word “dirty” as well as a metaphorical translation that alludes to guilt. Through its advertising Method proclaims that cleaning with Method products is the correct choice, and that any other choice will do the world a disservice.

In the second ad analyzed from the “Detox Your Home” campaign (available at <http://bit.ly/TkDCxk>), Method portrays a provocative visual—for cleaning supplies at least—when it compares its cleaning products with alcohol. The main visual is of an unknown cleaning product wrapped in a brown paper bag with the headline, “Lay off the hard stuff.” Once again, the humor and/or shock is downplayed during the transition from headline to body copy. The body copy becomes a political teaching tool informing consumers of the perils of cleaning with toxic chemicals.

“When you hit the bottle, the bottle hits back. Ordinary window cleaners often contain significant amounts of isopropyl alcohol. That’s the stuff that makes your eyes water, your nose sting, and your throat burn...” reads the body copy. The body copy in this ad concludes with a political statement not related to the environmental movement on the surface, but after having read through the few sentences of educational body copy prior to the close, consumers make the connection, “When it comes to alcohol, you have to know when to say when” reads the ad. The advertisers make learning this lesson easy, as they tie their message to a well-known and idealistic cliché in American culture, “know when to

say when.” A reader may ask if Method is still talking about the green movement or are they making a moral judgment?

The final ad analyzed for this study is also from the “Detox your Home” campaign. It begins with a visual that incorporates the text, “No Dumping”... and then the headline reads “Spray No Evil.” (ad visual available at <http://bit.ly/TkDCxk>). This ad once again follows the reformatory tone as previous ads in that it is playing good against evil. Method products (or environmentalism) is supposed to be the good guy, and if you are not an environmentalist (or perhaps simply using Method products) you just might be the opposite of good. The body copy once again remains generic and claims: “When you use toxic chemical cleaners in your home, those same chemicals run down your drain and back in to our water supply...” I point out that it reads: Run down YOUR drain and back in to OUR water supply. Uniting citizens as a collective to which each individual is called to be a responsible member. The body copy goes on to say that: “Method products are specially formulated to biodegrade quickly and safely, for a spot-free, guilt free shine.” The mere mention of the word guilt leads one to think of responsibility, and Method, in its branding and affirmation of the citizen consumer, seems to say that one way to reduce guilt in your life is to perform your duty to take care of the environment, or perhaps to just buy Method products.

The branding philosophy that Method founders have voiced publically is in line with Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius’s research into “green” advertising appeals. In their study, involving an experiment to measure attitude towards advertising using first a “green” appeal, and second a cost-saving appeal, they found that the “green” appeal was most effective with those subjects who are less involved with the environmental movement, consumers who might be considered “posers” or “part-time greenies” by the traditional “tree-hugging granola hippies” of the 1960s, 1970s, and even today (Schuhwerk and Lefkoff-Hagius 1995).

Ryan and Lowry stated that when they created Method Products they intended to create a company that combined both style and environmental consciousness. Style, according to Lowry, is what creates “mass market relevance for a “green” product... that is very much our strategy” (Ryan and Lowry 2008). Further, Lowry claims that if an eco-company does not have a design element infused with their brand, environmentally friendly products will only appeal to consumers who are already “green” (Ryan and Lowry 2008). Can a truly green product and/or company go mainstream? Is the advertising and marketing of a “green” product an oxymoron? Some scholars would say yes (Kilbourne 1995, Smerecnik 2010, Amazeen 2011).

As far as going to the masses with a “green” product, Lowry justifies Method Products decision by simply pointing out that if a company wants to create change in the world, they need to create change where the change is needed (Ryan and Lowry 2008). Change is most needed among people who are unaware of the fact that the planet faces major environmental concerns, or even worse, consumers who have the misperception that being “green” is difficult or expensive, and that “green” cleaning products don’t even work (Ryan and Lowry 2008). Thus attracting a mass audience, who may not be aware of environmental issues, will be achieved through not only design, but education too. These statements call out that education is key when it comes to reforming the ideal American citizen.

Method Products, in an effort to encourage environmentalism, to provide a resolution to the environmental issues that our planet is facing, and to sell products, used its advertising campaign “Detox Your Home” as a platform to inform and persuade consumers of the ways that they can do their part to help save the planet. The campaign is “geared toward creating new advocates,” says Francesca Schuler, Vice President of marketing for

Method (Miller 2007). These “advocates” can help teach others, and spread the ideals of the environmental movement.

Whether or not citizen reformation is necessary in America today or not, is not up for debate in this study. My goal is not to pass judgment on Method products, but to think critically about the public message they are projecting (if one was to take Method’s advertising and marketing at face value). When looking beyond the product promotion, Method appears to be in the business of trying to help the environment. They claim to be in business in order to infiltrate environmental change agents into the world “one cleaning product at a time” (Our Story 2011). Method focuses on “green sourcing” strategies such as waste (their factories recycle 100% of their cardboard and 100% of their shrink wrap), toxics (if the chemicals are “bad” they are not used, even if they are legal and/or commonly used in cleaning products), energy (they are 100% carbon neutral in their manufacturing), and water (100% of the water used to make Method products is recycled) (Our Story 2011), but the critical analyst needs to consider that these claims, among others, could simply be part of a great public relations strategy. The message presented to the public by Method is one of pure environmental concern, but in truth, the authenticity of the message should not go unquestioned.

Implications and conclusion

This study set out to grasp a deeper understanding of the junction between green advertising and consumer society. Through a rhetorical analysis it sought answers to the question: As companies incorporate the environmental movement into their advertising and branding what are they really telling us? And more specifically, in regards to a specific brand and its advertising and branding communication efforts, what message is Method sending in regards to the environmental movement?

The analysis of Method seems to suggest that advertisers' use of the advertising space is shifting, and via the incorporation of social movements, such as the environmental movement, encouraging a citizen consumer. Although this finding may not be generalizable to all advertisers, it does shed some light on the agenda-setting role of Method products. Method's agenda includes recruiting and reforming. Method seeks to recruit citizens, and reform them into green citizen-consumers—even if they are superficial activists. Some may suggest that consumers of Method are simply buying in to the “image” of being green and are not altruistic in their motives. Method doesn't discriminate between “true-greenies” or those who do not know much about the green movement (however they appear to hold preference for recruiting and reforming the latter). Those who are considered “true-greenies” most likely look beyond the “green” advertising appeals and understand that the *reduce* of “reduce, reuse, recycle” is the most effective way to address many of our environmental concerns.

The remaining average American citizens are bombarded with hundreds of advertising messages each day. When advertisers push social movements to the “mainstream,” the issues are bound to receive attention from a wider population base and the salience of the issue increases.

The collision of social movement and capitalism or business agenda is an interesting and important phenomenon to be studied. Through the analysis of Method it is obvious that a model for reforming the American citizen is at work. That said, the implications of this phenomenon are two-fold. First, when consumers are made aware of an issue that they had minimal to no previous knowledge on, awareness could be a positive start to initiating an interest and sometimes a desire to participate in the movement. This new information/awareness could also recruit new environmental advocates who will “buy in” to the idea of the reformed American citizen consumer.

Second, when a social issue is brought forth to an already informed audience, the marketing appeal could backfire as less than altruistic, and may appear to either belittle the cause or turn potential customers away from a brand. Although even a small step should be recognized as momentum toward environmental progress, traditional environmentalists may be leery of, or hesitant toward, the major role that business has begun to take in their movement.

The bottom line is recognition of the fact that the environmental movement has moved into the private realm, and although once considered a liberal movement, it has begun to shift into projecting a conservative agenda where model citizens are being defined as clean, green and environmentally friendly.

Although Method is a private company, through the use of its advertising and branding narratives, the experts at Method have helped construct a consumer perception of the environment as per Foucault's ecogovernmentality theory. In addition, Method has time and again set an agenda through the provision of tips, techniques, and guidelines, or simply a "method" to living as an eco-friendly citizen. This attempt to reform the American or citizen-consumer has helped push environmentalism to be what people think about when considering purchasing household cleaning products—whether with altruistic or egotistic motives.

It's important for scholars, marketers and consumers to know the various implications of the incorporation of social-politics into the advertising discourse. Advertising has long been known as a marketing function, working to promote and sell products in a business environment. When social issues and business meet head-on, interesting things happen. My hope is that if advertisers decide to take a stand regarding a social movement they do so carefully and with honest motives. The incorporation of social politics into the advertising

space can be a very powerful asset to those wishing to move a social movement forward, however, it can also do exactly the opposite if abused.

This study examined a heavily marketed company that seems to have built itself on the environmental movement. Despite this analysis, it is still possible that Method is not authentic in its motives. Without access to private business records, memos, and company goals, we can only take their green efforts at face value and analyze the public appearance of this private company. This study is novel to previous green marketing and advertising research as it examines more than just the potential impact of green messages on consumers and advertisers, but also considers the possible implications on society as a whole. “We’re a nation that shops to save the world” (Copeland 2007, 1), in the case of the environmental movement, let’s just hope we’re a little smarter than that.

References

- Amazeen, Michelle. 2011. "Gap (RED): Social responsibility campaign or window dressing?." *Journal of Business Ethics* 99, no. 2: 167-182.
- Atkin, Charles, and Gary Heald. 1976. "Effects of Political Advertising." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 40, no. 2: 216. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 3, 2012).
- Autio, Minna, Eva Heiskanen, and Visa Heinonen. "Narratives of 'green' consumers—The antihero, the environmental hero and the anarchist." *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 8, no. 1 (January 2009): 40-53.
- Banerjee, Subhabrata, Charles S. Gulas, and Easwar Iyer. "Shades of Green: A Multidimensional Analysis of Environmental Advertising." *Journal of Advertising* 24, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 21-31.
- Bowers, Thomas A. 1973. *Newspaper Political Advertising and the Agenda-Setting Function*. Journalism Quarterly, 1973. ERIC, EBSCOhost (accessed January 3, 2012).
- Cohen, Lizabeth. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.
- Copeland, Libby. "High-Water Marketing: Climate-Change Clothes, a Little Smug on the Hip." February, 18, 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/17/AR2007021701686.html> (accessed February 26, 2011).
- Foucault, Michel. "Governmentality" in Burchell, G.; Gordon C.; and Miller, P. eds. *The Foucault Effect*. London : Harvester Wheatsheaf. 87-104, 1991.
- "Guides for the use of Environmental Marketing Claims." Current as of April 4, 2011. <http://ecfr.gpoaccess.gov/cgi/t/text/textidx?c=ecfr&sid=5de11e010afaa51af478dbd337f0cad6&rqn=div5&view=text&node=16:1.0.1.2.24&idno=16> (accessed April 9, 2011).
- Ha-Brookshire, Jung E., and Pamela S. Norum. 2011. "Willingness to pay for socially responsible products: case of cotton apparel." *Journal of Consumer Marketing* 28, no. 5: 344-353.
- Hartmann, Patrick, and Vanessa Apaolaza-Ibáñez. "Green advertising revisited." *International Journal of Advertising* 28, no. 4 (November 2009): 715-739.
- Jubas, Kaela. 2007. "Conceptual con/fusion in democratic societies: Understandings and limitations of consumer-citizenship." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 7, no. 2: 1469-5405.
- Keum, Heejo, Narayan Devanathan, Sameer Deshpande, Michelle R. Nelson, and Dhavan V. Shah. 2004. "The Citizen-Consumer: Media Effects at the Intersection of Consumer and Civic Culture." *Political Communication* 21, no. 3: 369-391.

- Kilbourne, W. E. (1995). Green Advertising: Salvation or Oxymoron?. *Journal of Advertising*, 24(2), 7-20.
- Kiousis, Spiro. 2011. "AGENDA-SETTING AND ATTITUDES." *Journalism Studies* 12, no. 3: 359-374. *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 8, 2011).
- Lears, Jackson. *Fables Of Abundance: A Cultural History Of Advertising In America*. New York: Basic Books, 1994.
- Lowry, Adam. "Adam Lowry, the Man Behind the Method (Cleaning Products)" interview by Jacob Gordon. April 30, 2009. Web. <http://www.treehugger.com/files/2009/04/th-radio-adam-lowry.php> (accessed April 7, 2011).
- Marchand, Roland. *Advertising the American Dream*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- McCombs, Maxwell E., and Donald L. Shaw. 1972. "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36, no. 2: 176-187.
- Meehan, Eileen R., and Others And. 1993. "Rethinking Political Economy: Change and Continuity." *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4: 105-16.
- Miller, Lia. "Products to Break the Chemical Habit and Get Eco-Friendly. *The New York Times*". (July 19, 2007), 1-3, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/19/business/media/19adco.html> (accessed March 15, 2011).
- Moisander, Johanna. "Motivational complexity of green consumerism." *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 31, no. 4 (July 2007): 404-409.
- "Opportunity Green Business Conference 2009 Speaker Bios." 2009. <http://www.opportunitygreen.com/conference-speakers-full-bio.php> (accessed 7/31/2011).
- "Our Story." <http://www.methodhome.com/methodology/our-story> (accessed February 28, 2011).
- Page, Graham, and Helen Fearn. 2005. "Corporate Reputation: What Do Consumers Really Care About?." *Journal of Advertising Research* 45, no. 3: 305-313.
- "People Against Dirty." <http://www.methodhome.com/peopleagainstdirty> (accessed February 28, 2011).
- Ryan, Eric. "Method Cofounder Eric Ryan, on Building a Business With a Social Mission." March, 31, 2011. <http://www.fastcodesign.com/1663457/method-ceo-eric-ryan-on-building-a-business-with-a-social-mission> (accessed April 7, 2011).

- Ryan, Eric and Adam Lowry (founders of Method Products) interview by Sarah van Schagen. March 14, 2008. Web. <http://www.grist.org/article/fighting-dirty/> (accessed March 15, 2011).
- Ryan, Eric and Adam Lowry. *Squeaky Green: The Method Guide to Detoxing Your Home*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2008.
- Sandhu, Sukhbir, Lucie K. Ozanne, Clive Smallman, and Ross Cullen. "Consumer driven corporate environmentalism: Fact or fiction?." *Business Strategy and the Environment* 19, no. 6 (September 2010): 356-366.
- Scammell, Margaret. 2000. "The Internet and Civic Engagement: The Age of the Citizen-Consumer." *Political Communication* 17, no. 4: 351-355.
- Schuhwerk, Melody E., and Roxanne Lefkoff-Hagius. "Green or Non-Green? Does Type of Appeal Matter When Advertising a Green Product?." *Journal of Advertising* 24, no. 2 (Summer95 1995): 45-54.
- Selzer, Jack. 2004. "Rhetorical Analysis: Understanding How Texts Persuade Readers." In *What writing does and how it does it: An introduction to analyzing texts and textual practices*, 279-307. Mahwah, NJ US: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2004.
- Shrum, L.J., John A. McCarty, and Tina M. Lowrey. "Buyer Characteristics of the Green Consumer and Their Implications for Advertising Strategy." *Journal of Advertising* 24, no. 2 (Summer95 1995): 71-82.
- Sivulka, Juliann. *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising*. Belmont: Wadsworth, 1998.
- Smerecnik, Karl R., and Valerie R. Renegar. 2010. "Capitalistic Agency: The Rhetoric of BP's Helios Power Campaign." *Environmental Communication* 4, no. 2: 152-171.
- Sutherland, Max, and Johh Galloway. 1981. "Role of Advertising: Persuasion or Agenda Setting?." *Journal Of Advertising Research* 21, no. 5: 25-29. *Business Source Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 3, 2012).
- Zinkhan, George M., and Les Carlson. "Green Advertising and the Reluctant Consumer." *Journal of Advertising* 24, no. 2 (Summer95 1995): 1-6.