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'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/Y5rEp](http://bit.ly/Y5rEp) for visual) 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.
The purpose of this study is to use one brand: Method, (an environmentally conscious cleaning products company) to provide a snapshot of how a brand that is considered a leader in sustainability is portraying the environmental movement while encouraging consumption. Through a rhetorical analysis, this study seeks 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 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.

Method avoids using statistical or scientific fact 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 widow 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 reformational 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 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. The average American citizen is 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.

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. 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. 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.
Reference