



Marketing Messages

MARY CHARLESON

Why social and environmental responsibility now matter

Sustainability, environmental consciousness, going green, doing good, authenticity; they're all words and phrases that have swept into our vocabulary recently. But why the shift? Why now?

Just a short time ago the environment was largely a fringe concern. Giving back was limited to charity sponsorships. Now we have brands like Dove who aspire to evoke social change by challenging today's stereotypical view of beauty. Toyota has been positioned as an environmentally forward car manufacturer. Home Depot has launched over 1,000 Eco Options products to be more environmentally conscious. It might seem like a trend, but that would be a serious mistake. In fact this shift has been coming for some time. Three factors are contributing to this social and environmental shift:

1. Rebound from corporate greed. We all witnessed the scandal surrounding companies like Enron, Nortel and most recently Conrad Black. What has become painfully evident is that accountability now matters. These scandals awakened a giant within. Shareholders and consumers voted with their wallets. Corporate conscience became a bottom line issue.

2. Powerful weather events. We have been rocked by weather events worldwide. Hurricanes in the south, drought in the mid west, tsunamis in Asia, water shortages in Europe, and fires in Australia. In Vancouver winds of over 120 km uprooted, knocked down or broke off over 10,000 trees in Stanley Park last December. The Environment Canada graph of severe weather events in Canada rises like a ski jump over the last 40 years. Clearly something is not right. It took last winter for many Canadians to hit the tipping point. What they saw around them coupled with the phenomenal success of Al Gore's Inconvenient Truth raised the platform. People began to talk.

3. Demographic shifts. But this third factor is the most powerful one. Recent research conducted by TNS Canadian Facts through a cross Canada study of 1,026 respondents shows interesting demographic skews. There are three key insights: (1) This trend is incredibly strong with youth. Those under 25 care a lot about this issue. They have powerful ideals, they are wired and they are empowered to change the world. Their baby boomer parents told them that they could do anything. Now they seem posed to do just that. Coming into their greatest years of influence, they are the largest demographic group since the boomers. (2) The second demographic factor to consider is aging baby boomers, many now over 50. They represent a huge target group with incredible wealth and influence. They are now moving into a stage of life where they are considering their legacy and their impact on the world. They care a lot about this issue. (3) And finally there is the incredible power of the female consumer, recognized as buying or influencing 80% of purchases. That woman holding the purse skews significantly higher than men for sensitivity to environmental and social concerns.

Here's what the TNS Canadian Facts study revealed:

Have you ever switched from one brand to another that was about the same price and quality, because the other brand was associated with a more socially and environmentally responsible company?

Overall: 45% / Men: 41% / Women: 48% / Women 18-34: 61% / BC: 51%

"Past behaviour is a good predictor of future behaviour. When 45% of people say they have switched for this reason, that is a significant result," remarks Raymond Gee, Senior Research Associate, TNS Canadian Facts. "I don't know of any business that can afford to lose 45% of their customers." This is an astute caution to those who may resist addressing the issue. Young women in particular are quick to switch. Regionally BC is one of the most sensitive areas.

I consciously choose to do business with companies who are socially and environmentally responsible.

Overall: 37% / Men: 33% / Women: 42% / 18-24yrs: 41% / 25-34yrs: 35% / 35-49yrs: 34% / 50+ yrs: 43% / Women 50+ yrs: 57%

Youth, boomers, and women emerge as three groups with the greatest sensitivity and influence. These results indicate this trend is strong and has longevity.

Choosing to work for a company whose values are similar to my own is important to me.

Overall: 46% / Men: 42% / Women: 51% / Men 35-49yrs: 51% / Women 50+ yrs: 63% / BC: 55%

These results begin to address the importance of 'internal branding' and image around social responsibility as it relates to staff acquisition and retention. In BC, 55% of people said this was important. This is a major wake up call for employers who are will be experiencing employee acquisition issues in the coming years.

Social and environmental responsibility is no flash trend. Demographically it's got traction, and it's here to stay. The flight to sustainability does indeed appear to be sustainable.

Mary Charleson, President of Charleson Communications, is a marketing strategist, speaker, and consultant. She writes monthly and can be reached at mary@charleson.ca