



Marketing Messages

MARY CHARLESON

The Environmental tipping point

Malcolm Gladwell's book, "**The Tipping Point**" poses a number of theories about why certain social phenomena take off while others are relegated to obscurity. He calls the tipping point "That magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behaviour crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire. For anyone interested in marketing, and the influence of society for social or financial gain, it is an intriguing read.

I figure the environment hit a tipping point on or around December 27, 2006. That was the day I tried but couldn't rent Al Gore's, *An Inconvenient Truth*. My local Rogers Video store reported that all their copies were out, and that the number being returned was dwindling. Customers were simply choosing to keep the movie and pay the penalty. Retailers were sold out. In the east they were kayaking on the Rideau Canal, and we were recovering from windstorms. Mother nature had spoken, and it seemed we were finally listening.

In subsequent months the media and conversations have been littered with environmental coverage. The environment is hot, literally, and with a recent poll placing it as the number one concern among Canadians, even the politicians are now waking from their slumber. Seems the colour to wear this spring will be green.

There are many reasons to look at sustainability in your business practices. Beyond the social, emotional, and environmental benefits of doing so, it also makes good marketing and business sense.

In January **Pollara**, surveyed 1,200 people across Canada on this issue. Our goal was to get feedback on environmental issues from a marketing standpoint.

On whether they believe the time has come to deal with environmental sustainability:

82% of University graduates agreed, while agreement went to only 62% for those with no post secondary education. 81% of women and 72% of men agreed. Women across all age groups had similar levels of agreement as did men 18-35 yrs at 80%. However support by men dropped with age to 69% for men over 55 yrs. Quebec is passionate about this. 82% in the province agreed, which was the highest province in Canada, followed by BC and Ontario at 78%. Both urban and rural respondents shared the same level of support.

On whether they would pay more for products that are produced in an environmentally responsible manner:

Those with higher education and higher incomes were more apt to agree. 71% of those earning \$75,000 or more agreed and a further 36% agreed strongly. The results skewed female, with 57% of men 34-54yrs agreeing, while 70% of women in that age group agreed. 73% of women over 55 agreed and a further 42% strongly agreed. "The numbers are high all around, but there is a generation effect. Women seem to be more passionate about social and environmental issues, and become more so as they get older," notes **Michael Antecol, VP Pollara BC** and Quebec gave the highest support, both at 71%, while the prairies and Alberta were the least at 48% and 55% respectively. So are Canadians ready to buck up to support environmental initiatives? "Yes they are," says Michael Antecol, "and depending on who you target and where you conduct business, there are some pockets of greater opportunity."

Juxion Strategy, a local company focused on social and environmental sustainability marketing, has caught the updraft of this trend. "The appetite is there in a way I haven't seen in years. It's moved to the boardroom. Six months ago versus now is huge. It's moving so fast," says **Peter ter Weeme, Principal**. He notes the environmental initiative of large corporations such as GE and their Ecomagination program with products such as eco friendlier jet engines, bio gas engines, windfarms and photocells as examples. "GE has invested in things that link to their traditional offerings in an environmentally sustainable way," notes ter Weeme. "Juxion also does work around internal branding and employee retention. Youth want their work to represent the whole person. They don't want to check their values at the door," says ter Weeme. Given the support of youth for environment related issues and the coming labour shortage, there is a strong case to push for sustainability.

Locally, **Upholstery Arts** is company going green. They now offer a whole line of furniture made of wood certified by the **Forest Stewardship Council of Canada**. They also offer product take back, where you can return your purchase for reuse or recycling. Birks recent pledge to use no 'dirty gold' in support of the Canadian Boreal Initiative is another example.

From an internal and external branding perspective, environmental and social sustainability seem to be the way of the future. Customers and employees are demanding it. Are you ready to deliver?

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