



SAVE THE PLANET!

Sea levels are rising and the Greenhouse Effect has just gone nuclear. Now's the time to sell green products! A trend in the ascent, Chris Allsop takes a look at this sector and the sales opportunities it provides.

Green concerns are currently very big news. A recent, well-circulated report compiled from a satellite survey of the South Pole shows that Antarctica has been losing ice rapidly – the equivalent of about 40 trillion gallons of water a year from 2002 to 2005. With 'water, water all around and not a drop to drink' (see: drought crisis in South-East England) another story broke with the headline 'CO2 levels hit 30m year high' (*Metro*). The tabloid's dramatic introduction



was: 'Greenhouse gases have reached their highest levels for millions of years, leaving Earth on the brink of ecological disaster'.

Now, it's important to remember there's a good few centuries to go before complete meltdown, and while quitting your job to plant trees might be the socially responsible thing to do, it won't pay those soaring gas bills. However, the dramatic headlines and almost incomprehensible statistics will fuel

the masses to ask themselves once again, "what can I do?", which in turn should have any self-respecting salesperson asking, "how can this help me sell?"

A question that John Dickinson's marketing director Jane Rowe says sales people should have been asking themselves for the past 12 months to capitalise fully on the current resurgence of green issues. Office products suppliers connected in any way with paper have certainly been doing so – although it isn't restricted to just this group (pen manufacturer, Pilot, for example, follows the ISO 14021 auto-declarative standard which means the company has to declare the percentage of recycled materials and be clear about environmental benefits).

Dave Cooling, Howard Smith Paper Group's marketing director says that his company has launched a variety of new paper grades in the last 12 months that have "specific environmental credentials, which have been extremely successful and we see this continuing". Paper producer M-real also reacted to a burgeoning demand with the recent launch of LOGIC 300, a volume copier grade business paper with 30% recycled fibre content and ERA Silk, a coated graphical paper with a minimum of 50% recycled fibre content.

"Individuals, SME's, corporates and government are increasingly aware of the green issues facing us today from UK landfill to depletion of the ozone layer," says M-real UK's brand manager office papers, Paul O'Shaughnessy. "Many want the opportunity to make a positive contribution."

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**JANE ROWE,
MARKETING DIRECTOR,
JOHN DICKINSON**

However, is there serious intent by companies to make a difference? Is 'Corporate Social Responsibility' simply a buzz term that ultimately must bow before the all important bottom line? Rowe doesn't think so, and believes that the marketplace is moving to a position where a credible, demonstrable corporate responsibility policy is no longer an aspect that just looks good in a shareholder's annual report, but is something that is a necessary part of the business mix.

"It is moving to a position where it is a necessary part of the sales and marketing mix, a criterion that is used to make specific judgements on which supplier to use," continues

Rowe. "On this basis, in the next five years it will move to become a 'necessary to do' rather than just a 'nice to do'."

Veronica Heaven, corporate relations manager for national paper merchant, PaperCo, agrees, adding that, "companies pursuing a more active environmental strategy appear to be gaining market presence and exposure, suggesting that not only is 'green' procurement a good thing to be concerned about, but that the 'green agenda' can deliver a business benefit".

Which can only be great news for the sale of green products. But how to maximise your sales opportunities? Should you use statistics and theoretical 'worst case scenarios' (melting icecaps, Skegness overrun with porpoise etc. . .) to terrorise them into sales? "Fear is not a great sales tool to use in building long term valuable relationships and not something we would ever condone," says Howard Smith's Cooling.

Anyway, there's no need for such heavy handed tactics, as indicated by recent John Dickinson consumer focus group research. The company found that purchasers in large, medium and small organisations had a genuine preference to purchase green products wherever possible, a preference that had strengthened in the last year.

Instead, as Cooling suggests, return to solid sales basics and find out exactly what the customer wants, because the choices available to them are extensive.

"All our products have sound environmental credentials," he adds. "In addition to this we offer products >>>



LEFT Business today is more aware of the environment

with added environmental features, such as recycled and FSC, to support specific customer requirements.”

The extensive nature of green credentials also means that consumers will look to their suppliers for advice and problem solving solutions. O’Shaughnessy suggests that salespeople should make an extra effort to understand green issues and how they impact on us all. This will enable them to make the issues more relevant to the consumer.

“A more three dimensional conversation with a consumer will reap far more than simply offering a price,” he says. “Present a range of environmentally friendly products as a viable option and you will differentiate your offer, encourage trust and build confidence in you as an authority that can add real value.”

While the green factor is a popular one at the moment, it’s important to establish first exactly how important it is to a particular company. Heaven points out that for some, strong green credentials is an

entry level criterion, while for others it is simply a bonus.

Rowe agrees, adding that, “In Government departments, local authorities, charities and campaigning NGOs, it is an important issue. In PLCs accountable to shareholders, it is increasing in importance as part of a general CSR policy. In smaller private businesses, it is less of a priority at present, but for dealers this represents an opportunity. Presenting clear credible arguments and a defined range of green products is something consumers are waiting to see.”

Is this reluctance by smaller businesses down to high prices? Will green always be hampered by being seen as the more expensive option? Pilot’s Rachel Todd points out that its environmentally friendly ‘Begreen’ range carries no price premium and the products are priced at exactly the same price point as our traditional range.

“The extra expense is the cost to the manufacturer, which Pilot is absorbing,” she says. “Other

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suppliers do pass on the extra cost, but in our case, there is no increase in cost to the reseller or the consumer.”

Even when the products are more expensive, Rowe says that there is evidence consumers will pay a small premium for green. After all, consumers in offices are not spending their own money, but their

company’s, and if they can give themselves a “good green conscience” by choosing to buy green products in their office, then they will do so.

The future for green initiative is a fertile one. “The fact is business today is more aware of the environment,” says Cooling. “Coupled with this is the excellent quality of today’s recycled papers, which have good feel and reproduction qualities, making them ideal for many jobs, irrespective of their green credentials.”

Rowe reports that John Dickinson is planning a more comprehensive range of recycled books in the Black n’ Red range following an excellent reception for its recycled casebound notebook since its launch in January. She believes that green products will grow to a point when, “in ten years time we’ll look back at 2006 and wonder how small a part of the stationery portfolio it represented then”.

So don’t dillydally, save the planet! Get the knowledge, go out and use it. But remember to leave the drama for the headlines. ■