

## **A green marketing course for business undergraduates**

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Since the 1970s, periodic calls have been made for incorporation of sustainability issues into marketing and other business courses. Now more than ever, we need to prepare students for careers in the green economy. This article will describe the author's experience teaching a Green Marketing course to business undergraduates. A review of content, format, assignments, and resources may help others who would like to develop their own offering.

Keywords: green marketing, sustainable business, environment, teaching methods, marketing curriculum



“...In a special manner the universities have the contact with the younger generation needed to reorient the human community toward a greater awareness that the human exists, survives, and becomes whole only within the single great community of the planet Earth.” (Berry, 1999, p. 80)

## **Motivation and Rationale**

There are strong links between sustainable business, green citizens/consumers, and the role of colleges and universities. With respect to the environment, business educators have the potential to influence two important actors. Tomorrow's managers and leaders can be trained to adopt a more sustainable model of business. Students can also be encouraged to be informed and responsible citizens, investors, and consumers, who “vote” (at the ballot box and with their dollars) for policies, companies and products that promote sustainability. And for marketing in particular, there is a responsibility to show students that the strategies and tactics that contributed to environmental degradation by encouraging overconsumption, misuse of resources, and a “one-time use” disposable culture can also be enlisted to reverse it.

As society itself seems to be reaching a “tipping point” of environmental awareness and concern (thanks to “An Inconvenient Truth,” numerous other films, books and articles, and the recent catastrophe in the Gulf) student interest in and demand for related courses is growing. This paper describes a special topics course in Green Marketing which was designed to give students the skills, knowledge and (most important) inspiration necessary to be environmentally sensitive and responsible citizens, consumers and future business leaders.

## **Course Preparation and Promotion**

Promotion for the Green Marketing (GM) course began the previous spring, with a special Earth Day guest speaker for the Marketing Club. A local entrepreneur had applied his advertising and PR expertise to an anti-bottled water campaign. Students were excited to learn about Tappening.com, and to hear first-hand that their marketing talents and skill sets could be used to make profits while helping the planet. A flyer advertising the fall semester Green Marketing course was distributed at that meeting and other Earth Day events, posted around campus, and sent to faculty advisors. (The Finance Department offers a course in Sustainable Finance, so the following year a promotional flyer showcased both opportunities to “Get Ready for the Green Economy.”)

While enrollment was slow to build, 16 students eventually enrolled in the course. They were encouraged to follow their own interests as much as possible, and to serve as “co-creators” of this new course through their discoveries, contributions, and active participation. Learning objectives were purposely simple and modest: to acquire a greater understanding of and appreciation for the concepts, principles and strategies associated with green marketing, to build enthusiasm for green marketing, and (corny as it sounds) to empower them as future managers and consumers who would act and advocate on behalf of sustainability.

To set a good example, the syllabus was printed back-to-back on kenaf tree-free paper. Since this was a “Current Issues” course, primary resources for exploration of the topic of Green Marketing would be the Internet and current business, popular, and environmental press. A companion Blackboard website was loaded with links to relevant websites, articles, reports, and

videos. Two books were recommended: Esty and Winston's *Green to Gold* and Ottman's *Green Marketing*. (See Exhibit at the end of this article for examples of additional resources.)

Resources for course structure and lectures were plentiful. Mintu and Lozada (1993) trace the greening of marketing education back to the 1970s, and provided encouragement and suggestions for faculty. Bridges and Wilhelm (2008) was an invaluable reference for planning the course. Other prime sources for lecturing on specific topics included Fuller (1999) and edited volumes by Charter and Polonsky (1999) and Galea (2004).

### **Course Content, Format, and Assignments**

The course topics moved from general to the specific, beginning with concepts related to environmentalism and sustainable development. Students were first introduced to the environmental movement, the concept of sustainability, and principles like the "Tragedy of the Commons." This led to sustainable business, and concepts like CSR, triple bottom line, 3 Ps (people, planet, profit), and the "green wave." These business trends created the context for green marketing, starting with the consumer, target marketing (using Green Gauge and other segmentation) and positioning, and moving on to the green marketing mix.

Students had all learned about the 4 P's in the Marketing Principles course, but now it was time to explore their sustainable counterparts. For example, product-related topics included life cycle assessment (LCA), cradle-to-cradle design, biomimicry, packaging reduction, green seals and other certification, and dematerialization. Students learned to extend the traditional three R's of "reduce, reuse, recycle" by adding "redesign and reimagine."

Pricing raised the question of how to handle externalities like pollution, which are either internalized (with attendant costs to producers and consumers) or imposed on society, as well as competitive concerns and consumer perceptions of value. "Place" led to discussion of supply chain management, transportation impact, and use of specialized channels vs. greening of mass merchandisers (including Target and Wal-Mart). For promotion and marketing communications, environmental message creation and media choice were addressed, with special attention to issues of credibility (vs. greenwashing), the need to educate consumers, and avoidance of *green marketing myopia* (Ottman, et al., 2006).

An emphasis on the consumer pervaded the course from the first day, when students were asked to measure their own carbon footprint and attempt to reduce it over the course of the semester. In a final written assignment, they reported and reflected on their progress and related it to the course. This was just one of several experiential exercises that were used to apply what they were learning. After discussion of the role of environmental knowledge and perceived consumer effectiveness on green purchasing, and review of marketing research methods, students did some interviews to measure consumer awareness of and attitudes toward the issues underlying Greenpeace's "Kleercut" campaign (i.e., lack of recycled content in tissue paper products). Discussion of pricing led naturally to a short assignment comparing two brands or versions (one "regular" one "green") of the same product category (of the student's choosing). When students reported their findings, they were surprised to learn that in many cases the green alternative was *less* expensive than its standard counterpart.

Longer projects included the semester-long sustainable consumer behavior task discussed above, a research report on the greening of a particular industry or product of the student's choosing (which included clothing, cosmetics and sports stadiums, among others), and an analysis of an advertising campaign for a "green" product, service, or idea. Students seemed to

enjoy these hands-on assignments, which all had an oral presentation component and allowed them to share new information and innovations with the group. The class was constantly on the lookout for examples of green products, from disposable plates derived from corn, to soap berries (a natural alternative to laundry detergent). Creative thinking was encouraged, for example by asking students to brainstorm alternative uses for or products that could be made from used plastic take-out food containers. This led to discussion of companies like TerraCycle and Preserve Products that recover containers from consumers (in the latter case, through high-profile partnerships with Whole Foods and Stonybrook Farms) and recycle them into new products.

## Resources

One of the benefits of teaching a Green Marketing course at this particular time in history is the abundance of pertinent resources, including websites, articles, and videos, and the availability of guest speakers. Every day brings new examples to illustrate and apply the material. For example, the *New York Times* (which has a green business website and Green Inc blog) had a feature article including an embedded online video about new controversial one-gallon milk jugs that had recently been introduced in the New York metro area. This initiative reduced packaging, storage and transportation costs, but required users to learn new pouring techniques, which created consumer resistance (and a ready-made case for class discussion).

During the semester, readings were assigned from the two books mentioned above as well as numerous online articles and reports. Students were also asked to subscribe to Grist.org and at least one of the sustainable business newsletters (e.g., Sustainable Life Media, GreenBiz.com), to consult some of the green guide-type websites (e.g., National Geographic's Green Guide, TreeHugger, Big Green Purse, New American Dream) for assistance in modifying their own consumer behavior, and to find "green marketing in the news" to share with the class. Since a co-founder of the student environmental club was enrolled in the class, all students were also added to her e-mail distribution list, so they could stay abreast of club and campus greening activities.

## Videos, Guest Speakers, Cases

Undergraduate students always seem to enjoy videos. Shorter online offerings included the famous "Story of Stuff" (which really impressed students with its message and its clarity), a presentation by Solitaire Townsend of Futerra Communications, and segments from the Sundance Channel's "Big Ideas for a Small Planet" series (now available on DVD). When teaching the course the following fall, a beautifully illustrated TED talk on biomimicry by Janine Benyus was added. Longer videos included Tom Friedman's "Green: The New Red, White and Blue" and the great documentary "Who Killed the Electric Car?" (which was shared with a Business and Society class that met at the same hour).

There are many more websites that host online videos related to the environment and green business, from Reuters to Zaproot, and new documentaries that can be incorporated in the course in the future (e.g., "Food, Inc." and "No Impact Man"). Students themselves are adept at finding commercials online, which came in handy for discussion of marketing communications and their green advertising project presentations. And it was their idea to supplement discussion of sustainable consumption at the final class meeting with excerpts from "Wall-E."

The GM course was also enhanced by periodic guest speakers, who were relatively easy to find and more than happy to share their expertise. A recruiter from Enterprise Rent-a-Car volunteered to talk to the class about her corporation's greening initiatives. A local entrepreneur who had begun a new environmentally responsible limo/taxi service (all hybrid fleet) described his venture to the students and obtained useful feedback from this potential target market. A third speaker, a sustainable management and policy consultant (and adjunct who teaches a Sustainable Finance course at the college) provided an overview of sustainability economics as a lead-in to discussion of pricing decisions. A fourth guest, whose career included environmental journalism and corporate communications, talked about his experience at various companies (including Union Carbide, where he worked on PR following the Bhopal disaster). He also shared some findings of his own Ph.D. research on consumer purchase of environmentally preferred products, which set the stage for the marketing communications topic.

In fall 2009, the Enterprise and Green World Taxi speakers returned, and were supplemented by two new contributors. Representatives from Tomra described an on-campus reverse vending machine (for can and bottle recycling) and discussed its feasibility with the students. And the entire college community was invited to hear the Sustainability Director of PepsiCo talk about global water issues. By inviting other classes and creating events around GM guest speakers and film screenings, visibility of the course and subject matter was enhanced.

The readings, news, and videos were replete with old and new examples of green marketing decisions and ventures, but we did discuss one comprehensive case (Deja Shoes) toward the end of the semester. It was easy to update and compare that undertaking with current developments in greening of footwear, from niche players to Nike to Payless (which had just announced a new line of fashionable eco-friendly shoes). The manager of a local store donated a Brooks "MoGo" running shoe display from their front window. Like most of the business people who heard about the course, he was delighted that college students are learning about green marketing.

## Conclusions

The high level of student involvement and apparent satisfaction with this new Green Marketing course encouraged the department to offer it again the following fall. The second time around, the basic format was the same, but content was constantly refreshed by guest speakers, new videos, and the green marketing news and topics unfolding around us. Students in both years said that they enjoyed the variety of readings, videos, guest speakers, and assignments. Most important, their final reports revealed a personal "greening" of hearts and minds that may last longer than one semester.

Even allowing for social desirability bias, it appears that students' environmental consciousness was definitely raised, and that they also realized the importance of individual actions. While attempting to become more sustainable consumers, they met and enjoyed the challenges of forming new attitudes and habits, and learned that they could save money in the process. Students reported tactics like finding new uses for items that would otherwise be discarded (turning jars into drinking glasses, a milk crate into a shoe rack), changing to CFL light bulbs and cloth napkins, reading product labels more carefully, re-using shopping bags or switching to cloth, and buying a smaller car or deciding not to bring one to campus. They discovered that cooperation of others (including roommates and relatives) was important, and some students decided to try to exert more influence, thus becoming opinion leaders at home, at

school, and at work. One student, employed by day as a nursery school teacher, persuaded her principal to switch to recycled paper products. The recycled versions were actually cheaper than what had been purchased for the school, so she gained points with “upper management” for her greening initiative.

Other comments in student papers hinted at more permanent empowerment that can have an impact on their lives, the companies they work for, and the planet that we inhabit. Here are two samples:

“I believe that I will be able to sustain and possibly even increase my “green” consumer behavior because although I might not see these changes coming into great effect now, I know they will make the future a healthier and a better place for my kids and others.”

“Taking this green marketing course has increased my level of awareness about environmental problems and it has educated me on how I can make a difference. Green products and the marketing of these products are only going to increase with time, and I believe green products are going to become more mainstream in the next several years. Every little change makes a difference and in a world where everyone is affected by the environment, it is crucial to make these changes.”

Just as sustainable consumption may best begin with small, simple changes in behavior (as recognized by Marcal, and embodied in the new “Small Steps” brand name for their recycled paper products), sustainability can be introduced into the Marketing curriculum by offering a modest but enjoyable Green Marketing seminar like the one described here.

## References

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**Exhibit  
Sample Resources**

**Online Sources of Green Marketing News, Articles, and Cases**

GreenBiz – Green Business News [www.greenbiz.com/](http://www.greenbiz.com/)  
Green Marketing Pioneer Jacquelyn Ottman’s website [www.greenmarketing.com/](http://www.greenmarketing.com/)  
*Green to Gold* companion website [www.eco-advantage.com/](http://www.eco-advantage.com/)  
Grist Environmental News [www.grist.org/](http://www.grist.org/)  
Joel Makower’s blog: <http://makower.typepad.com/>  
New York Times “Business of Green” section and Green Inc. blog:  
<http://nytimes.com/business/businessspecial2/>  
Sustainable Life Media [www.sustainablelifemedia.com/](http://www.sustainablelifemedia.com/)  
Wall Street Journal Environment section  
[http://online.wsj.com/public/page/0\\_0\\_WZ\\_0\\_0224.html?mod=djemSPECIAL](http://online.wsj.com/public/page/0_0_WZ_0_0224.html?mod=djemSPECIAL)

**Online Reports**

CSR Europe Sustainable Marketing Guide  
[www.csreurope.org/data/files/sustainablemarketingguide.pdf](http://www.csreurope.org/data/files/sustainablemarketingguide.pdf)  
Ecopromising Report [www.forumforthefuture.org/Library/Eco-promising](http://www.forumforthefuture.org/Library/Eco-promising)  
Futerra Communications [www.futerra.co.uk/revolution/leading\\_thinking](http://www.futerra.co.uk/revolution/leading_thinking)  
Rand Report on Green Consumer Power [www.rand.org/scitech/stpi/ourfuture/Consumer/](http://www.rand.org/scitech/stpi/ourfuture/Consumer/)  
Trendwatching “Eco-Iconic” products <http://trendwatching.com/trends/eoiconic.htm>

**Carbon and Water Calculator Websites**

Earthlab Carbon Calculator [www.earthlab.com/index.aspx?ecp=1](http://www.earthlab.com/index.aspx?ecp=1)  
Earth Day Network Footprint Calculator [www.earthday.net/footprint2/index.html](http://www.earthday.net/footprint2/index.html)  
Greendex Worldwide Tracking Survey [www.nationalgeographic.com/greendex/](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/greendex/)  
Water Footprint Calculator [www.waterfootprint.org/?page=files/home](http://www.waterfootprint.org/?page=files/home)

**Green Guides and Tips**

Big Green Purse – [www.biggreenpurse.com/](http://www.biggreenpurse.com/)  
Consumer Reports Greener Choices [www.greenerchoices.org/](http://www.greenerchoices.org/)  
Earth 911 <http://earth911.com/>  
Green America (formerly CoopAmerica) [www.greenamericatoday.org](http://www.greenamericatoday.org)  
LOHAS (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability) [www.lohas.com/](http://www.lohas.com/)  
National Geographic Green Guide [www.thegreenguide.com/](http://www.thegreenguide.com/)  
New American Dream [www.newdream.org/](http://www.newdream.org/) (with Conscious Consumer campaign)  
NRDC Green Living Guides [www.nrdc.org/greenliving/guides/default.asp](http://www.nrdc.org/greenliving/guides/default.asp)  
The Daily Green [www.thedailygreen.com](http://www.thedailygreen.com)  
TreeHugger <http://www.treehugger.com/>

**Online Presentations and Videos**

Biomimicry explained and beautifully illustrated by Janine Benyus in this TED talk  
[www.ted.com/talks/janine\\_benyus\\_biomimicry\\_in\\_action.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/janine_benyus_biomimicry_in_action.html)  
The Story of Stuff – A modern classic [www.storyofstuff.com/](http://www.storyofstuff.com/)

### **Films and Documentaries**

“Green: The New Red, White and Blue” (Tom Friedman) Discovery Channel store  
Sundance Channel “Big Ideas for a Small Planet” – Season 1 DVD  
“Who Killed the Electric Car?” [www.whokilledtheelectriccar.com](http://www.whokilledtheelectriccar.com)  
Food, Inc. [www.foodincmovie.com](http://www.foodincmovie.com)  
No Impact Man <http://noimpactproject.org/>

### **Product Design**

Biomimicry Institute – with link to “Ask Nature” [www.biomimicryinstitute.org/](http://www.biomimicryinstitute.org/)  
Environmental Defense Fund Innovation Exchange <http://innovation.edf.org/home.cfm>  
MBDC – Good source of Cradle to Cradle information [www.mbdc.com/](http://www.mbdc.com/)

### **Green Companies/Corporate Greening Activities**

Enterprise “Keys to Green” website [www.keystogreen.com](http://www.keystogreen.com)  
Green World Taxi [www.greenworldtaxi.com](http://www.greenworldtaxi.com)  
Nike “Considered Design” [www.nikebiz.com/responsibility/considered\\_design/index.html](http://www.nikebiz.com/responsibility/considered_design/index.html)  
PepsiCo [www.pepsico.com/Purpose/Sustainability/Environmental-Sustainability.html](http://www.pepsico.com/Purpose/Sustainability/Environmental-Sustainability.html)  
Preserve Products [www.preserveproducts.com/](http://www.preserveproducts.com/)  
TerraCycle – a pioneer in making products from waste [www.terracecycle.net/](http://www.terracecycle.net/)

### **Marketing Communications/Advertising**

FTC Guidelines for use of environmental marketing claims  
[www.ftc.gov/bcp/grnrule/guides980427.htm](http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/grnrule/guides980427.htm)  
Green Seal [www.greenseal.org/](http://www.greenseal.org/)  
Toyota Prius Television Commercials (including how they did it)  
[www.toyota.com/prius-hybrid/commercial.html](http://www.toyota.com/prius-hybrid/commercial.html)  
Psychology of Climate Change Communication – article with link to CRED report:  
[www.grist.org/article/2009-11-05-climate-psychology-in-cartoons-clues-for-solving-the-messaging](http://www.grist.org/article/2009-11-05-climate-psychology-in-cartoons-clues-for-solving-the-messaging)

### **Career Related websites**

Green Careers Center <http://environmentalcareer.com>  
Green Jobs for All [www.greenforall.org](http://www.greenforall.org)  
Greenbiz.com Career page <http://jobs.greenbiz.com/>  
Grist, How to Find a Green Job: [www.grist.org/article/apply-yourself/](http://www.grist.org/article/apply-yourself/)

### **Selected New Books**

Frank-Martin Belz and Ken Peattie, *Sustainability Marketing: A Global Perspective* (Wiley, 2009)  
Joel Makower, *Strategies for the Green Economy: Opportunities and Challenges in the New World of Business*, (US Green Building Council, 2008)  
Michael V. Russo, ed., *Environmental Management: Readings and Cases* (Sage 2008)