

Planet-protective plans required

Ways in which personal care products are made, packaged and transported may have to change dramatically in order to satisfy new criteria of consumers.

Already there is quiet change underway in marketing moods in some Western countries. The desire for natural products is slowly shifting from a desire for exotic naturals and plants with enticing names to themes that are far more subtle and planet-protective.

The UK seems to be finding a conscience and the bad news seems to concentrate on those products that are being produced cheaply using child labour or under-privileged people. The push to buy products that ensure the farmers, growers and processors receive a fair price for their goods is slowly but most certainly gaining momentum. In fairness, it was the Body Shop and in particular Anita Roddick that started her campaign for "Trade not Aid" and introduced the country to the concept. Products such as Zambian honey and African shea butter (*Butyrospermum parkii*) were among the first to appear as community traded raw materials.

The philosophy is gaining a following. For many, it is no longer acceptable to purchase coffee at a price that means that those who grow and harvest it starve (the coffee is subsequently sold in fancy coffee shops at vast profit). The consumer is now developing a conscience that demands the fair treatment for people who live in squalid conditions and labour for vast numbers of hours in order to supply the affluent West.

There are numerous materials that are now involved in this type of initiative and there are various schemes that help improve the standard of living, health and education of those in Third World countries. The implications on the cost of sales are so small that consumers are more than happy to support the schemes.

Criticised

Consumers in the West are being criticised for increasing their carbon footprints by driving their cars or flying to warmer places for holidays. Businesses are being



criticised corporately for the wasteful products they make, for excess packaging, and for the vast quantities of fuel and resources that are spent transporting them from place of manufacture. Consumers cannot be blamed for being concerned when they are being asked to turn off electrical equipment, not leave electrical appliances on stand-by, and to use energy-saving light bulbs that cost a fortune.

The latest legislation REACH (Registration, Evaluation and Authorization of Chemicals) requires all raw materials to be registered and no finished product to be imported into Europe unless all the materials are REACH registered. In the Far East, and elsewhere outside Europe, one might get the impression that the foreign raw material suppliers were caught napping or found the registration process too complex or too onerous because the European raw material suppliers were not slow to open offices in China, Malaysia and on other distant shores in order to maximise the beneficial impact of this legislation. One might wonder if this legislation was produced to provide a barrier to trade – surely this was not the case.

The impact on the environment and

the amount of carbon released into the atmosphere as a result of this situation is now horrendous. Raw materials are being shipped from Europe on a long and tortuous journey into China where they are blended with local water, packed into components made of virgin plastics and then shipped all the way back to the United Kingdom. The low overheads in labour costs make this economically viable, but now there are retailers such as Marks & Spencer which are looking not only at the cost of goods but also the cost to the planet.

The concept of "natural" which recently has been confused by the addition of the supply of "organic" products and by the concept of "fair traded", is now being further complicated by the addition of the word "eco". Ecological is the newest buzz word and we will need to be prepared to answer some very tough questions about it.

The evolution of ecologically and environmentally friendly products is going to take a number of forms and we are starting to see a variety of plans that are designed to satisfy the conscience of the planet-caring consumer.

Carbon compensation

Some factories are looking at ways to cut down on their costs and energy consumption. It was reported in the press that one retailer was looking at shipping goods from one of its suppliers by canal barge which is a less energy consuming method compared to road haulage and is more reminiscent of the Victorian days than the third millennium.

There are businesses looking at installing wind turbines, solar panels and other energy reducing processes, such as those involving heat exchangers, in their manufacturing areas to save on energy losses and hopefully put energy back into the system to restore some of the carbon balance. Once again one is forced to question the carbon production required to make a wind turbine generator and whether that cost will be repaid in the working life time of such plant.

Some companies are discouraging the use of company cars in preference for walking or cycling to work. It will come as no surprise to learn that all of these ideas are old history to Anita Roddick who implemented not only these ideas but was looking also at ways to process her factory's waste by installing a natural-based water processing plant that involved digestive sludges and *Phragmites* spp of reeds to purify and polish processed water.

Imagine the situation today if all factories had reinvested some of their profits in this way. Sadly this is not the case as most factories and businesses are ruled by their share prices and the stock market. The need for high returns and profits at any cost does not encourage any investment in the care of the environment nor are there any concerns for the impact of a business on the planet and its climate.

The time to count the cost of this over-indulgence is not now, because we are well beyond the time of now, and our necessary reaction is long overdue. Anybody who says that global warming is a blip and sees the melting of the polar ice caps and associated pack ice as a minor abnormality is not living in the real world.

The replanting of trees will never be at a rate to compensate the rate at which they are being stripped out. The rain forests disappear at a rate that is measured in hectares per day and we are planting new trees at a rate that is measured in square yards.

Sophisticated technology

The sophisticated technology now available to us should mean that we can meet from every corner of the world in a virtual office linked by broadband, web



cams and high speed computers. However, this is hardly ever the case, and more often than not we fly ever-increasing distances and take more long-haul flights in order to seek out new business and create more wealth and opportunities. This appears to be a society that has all the tools but none of the willingness to use them.

This need for speed, for faster physical connections produces huge demands on fuel resources that are starting to dwindle. Vast areas of agricultural land are going to be required to grow crops that can be grown for bio-fuel. Yet with huge growth in populations, the demand on land for growing food crops is going to increase as well. Where will the balance come? How expensive will food become? Will climate change enable us to utilise the land efficiently and have both food and fuel needs satisfied?

There can be no doubt that demands for petrochemicals continue to grow unabated and that the future will rely on either vegetable fatty acids or fermented alcohol for alternative feedstock and energy. Those countries rich in hydro-electricity may well turn to hydrogen as the clean fuel of the future. The danger with hydrogen is the very large bang it makes when two molecules of it meet one of oxygen in the presence of a spark.

The way forward

The future is not going to look like today. Bottles and containers that are used once and then thrown away are not sustainable. Taking a glass bottle to a recycling bin, breaking it, melting it down again and then reforming it is a wasteful nonsense. The bottle should be washed and cleaned and then refilled either by taking the bottle back to the retailer and filling it in the shop, or by the manufacturer taking it back to the factory and reprocessing it. In the "good old days" in the UK, lemonade bottles and beer bottles were always subject to a deposit and many schoolchildren made a welcome addition to their pocket money by redeeming them with the retailer.

We are not geared up to refill bottles in the new mega-stores and the idea of returning a refundable bottle is too hard to visualise. However, the return to the old-fashioned cutting and packing of cheese, bacon and meats at deli counters (a practice that is increasing in popularity) would have been viewed as a retrograde step five years ago. Consumers increasingly are looking for the personal touch and a trip to Abercrombie & Fitch in London (clothing for mainly 16- to 25-year-olds) should be enough to convince anybody that service is coming back into



the retail environment in new and exciting ways that challenge existing retail theory.

Consumers will one day be charged by the waste they produce and have to pay by the weight they have collected that cannot be recycled. It is only through the reduction in needless packaging that supermarkets and retailers will be able to sustain a competitive and aggressive pricing strategy. Recycled plastic does not return as new plastic bottles – it comes back as garden furniture or traffic cones. Packaging used today for food and cosmetics demands perfect clarity and purity. Maybe collecting the old plastic for recycling is a little misleading for the consumer, especially when there is plenty of rumour that says a lot of recycled packaging material is being sent back to China, the old Eastern Bloc countries and other places for "reprocessing" because the demand and use for this second rate scrap is so low.

The consumer in the UK is not against recycling. The entertainment media is full of programmes that look at recycling antiques, selling at auction and selling unwanted possessions at car boot sales. The growth of charity outlets selling unwanted clothes, books and other unwanted items is notable and should give us confidence on the readiness of consumers to adopt and embrace a recycling policy.

Perfumery

The use of expensive containers and elegant vessels is an idea from the past – when people would go to the chemist or apothecary store for a glass vial of perfume which they took home and then poured into their own atomiser or perfume bottle. The perfume or eau de toilette was designer label, but the packaging was from the supplier of the consumer's choice.



Colour cosmetics

In the same way, one could buy a lipstick refill that could be fitted into an elegant and very expensive case that was more akin to a piece of jewellery or “object d’art” than a single-use item. The idea of fitting cheap low cost components into designer cases is one that could work now for the environment and the consumer. The idea could apply to most colour cosmetics if it was generally accepted and if there was agreement for standard sizes.

Toiletries

The return to glass bottles may not be as far away as we imagine. It is likely that the consumer will buy pouches or sachets of concentrate of shampoos, foam baths and shower gels and put the contents into a cleaned and dried empty bottle, diluting the product with water if appropriate. The receiving container could be a crystal decanter or a carefully salvaged PET bottle.

Soap could easily be sold as naked bars packed into large cardboard trays for delivery into store, with the consumer taking the bar and wrapping it in tissue paper for themselves. In the old days soap would be sold in blocks and cut with cheese wire. The bars would be stamped with the company logo.

Emulsions could be sold in foil pouches for lotions and thin creams or even in milk cartons. Thick creams could be sold in this manner as well or even in plastic yoghurt pots that dropped into cases that then became double-walled jars. The concept of multi-use components must again feature at the centre of reducing weight and unnecessary waste of resources.

Conclusions

Consumers like their products just the way they are and they enjoy the choice, the look and the promise. It will be a hard task to convince them that there is a need to go back to the years more reminiscent of the 1950s, when times were more austere and resources more precious.

The days of throwing an item away when it ceases to function may be a luxury the planet can no longer afford. There is an urgent need for service industries that can once again mend things or can recycle the key components, but more than anything there is an urgent need for some thriftiness and ingenuity. We need quality goods that are built to last and that do not have built-in obsolescence.

The future is going to be interesting – will we see another marketing scam unfold, or will we be part of a revolution to try and protect the planet from global warming and consumer excess.