

CONSUMERS WARM TO “GREEN” PRODUCTS, WANT TO MAKE GOOD CHOICES

Sustainability a Hot Topic at International Home + Housewares Show

ROSEMONT, ILL (January 2008)—From designers to CEOs, the housewares industry is responding to rising consumer awareness of a sustainable future that fosters a culture of shared responsibility.

This movement is embodied by an emphasis on sustainability at the 2008 International Home + Housewares Show. A lynchpin of the Show, the Housewares Design Theater this year features 19 presentations by top product designers and consumer researchers. Eleven of those presentations focus on green and sustainability, with topics ranging from embedding sustainable design into new products, to corporate sustainability reporting and defining what consumers really want to know about “green” product production. The theater is located in the Level 3 Lobby of the Lakeside Center.

The first step toward a truly sustainable future is creating it, says JohnPaul Kusz of the Center for Sustainable Enterprise at the Illinois Institute of Technology. “As Einstein is claimed to have said, ‘the best way to predict the future is to invent it,’” Kusz says. His presentation at the Show, “Inventing a Sustainable Future,” will focus on how design can be the engine for behavior change as well as new products.

“My contention is that we can extend the design brief to include the engagement of the end user in a dialogue with the product and its maker that creates a relationship of shared responsibility and stewardship,” he says. “By doing so, we can move from simply designing artifacts to designing and developing comprehensive business and system models that bring more value to the brands we create.” He will provide real world examples of this “emerging paradigm” during his presentation.

One emergent “green” concept is corporate sustainability reports, according to Chad Upham, founder of Covive, Inc., a San Francisco-based consulting and design firm that guides corporations through the process of developing those reports. Upham says the process drives “real strategy and innovation” for the long term. He notes that every major company produces an annual financial report, which helps investors and analysts make decisions about their commitment to the company, which justifies a similar report on sustainability.

“Over the past decade, with the increase in access to global information through the Internet and

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media, the public has grown more aware of the social and environmental liabilities of the products they consume,” he says. “More consumers are basing their buying decisions on social and environmental factors in addition to quality and price. Corporations that are proactive at adopting strategies to reduce environmental impacts and strengthen communities build consumer confidence and can discover tremendous economic benefits through efficiency and goodwill.”

Upham will describe sustainability reporting and demonstrate how retailers, manufacturers and suppliers are using reports to build consumer confidence and drive innovation.

Mark Dzierzk of Laga/One80 Design describes the changing product development process as moving from “a three-legged to a four-legged stool,” the latter including sustainability as well as what “works well, looks good and costs little.” He says the “old chestnut” that consumers won’t pay more for a product that includes an authentic sustainability element “is no longer true.”

“From Wal-Mart to Detroit to Wall Street, green has come into its own as a sincere piece of the go-to-market plan,” Dzierzk says. “The mistake many companies make is to lead with green or compromise the other three legs. Looks great, works great, costs the right amount and ‘is green’ are the new table stakes in housewares, packaging and the design industry in general. Without the fourth leg, you will not be taken seriously in the future.”

Dzierzk’s Design Theater presentation is entitled “Green Today, Here Tomorrow: The Emotional Currency of Sustainability.”

Another element of an effective sustainability movement is cutting through the hype and zeroing in on what consumers want to hear as “green” becomes the buzzword of the early 21st century. Suzanne Shelton, CEO of the Shelton Group, produces “Energy Pulse,” a national consumer study on energy use, energy conservation and purchase propensities for green products and services. In its third year as of 2007, the survey has shown that while today’s consumers embrace the concept of green home products, they also believe “green” may have more to do with the color of money they’ll shell out than saving the planet. Shelton will talk about “Cutting Through the Green Clutter – What Consumers Really Want to Hear.”

“There’s more to ‘green fatigue’ than just ‘greenwashing,’ which the public generally associates with companies trying to sell products with only marginal environmentally friendly features,” Shelton says.

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“With today’s economy, green fatigue is largely equated to price fatigue. Prices really matter right now and consumers are far more likely to get initial sticker shock when buying a green product than doing the math to figure out they would be saving money in the long run, with energy efficiency for example. People are becoming much more inquiring about the bill of green goods being sold to them – not only in terms of ‘is it as green as they say it is,’ but also ‘does it matter enough for me to pay extra?’

“The good news is that companies can really seize an opportunity now to be bold in their advertising, creative strategy, branding and all of their marketing communications to differentiate their products with a level of sophistication that takes on today’s challenges of consumer perceptions, skepticisms and price sensitivities,” she adds. Consumers today are very worried about the environment.”

How worried? For the first time in more than 20 years of consumer research, Albing International Marketing (AIM) has identified an “increasingly passionate interest in the environment,” according to AIM President Robin Albing. “Maybe it’s the influence of Al Gore’s ‘An Inconvenient Truth,’ or a recognition by Boomers that they aren’t going to live forever after all and they better fix a few things before they go.”

In an online survey of more than 1,500 consumers, AIM found that 39 percent said “green” is very important to them. Another 39 percent said it was somewhat important and it “probably” should be more important to them. Four percent said it is “critical” to all of their decision-making.

Albing says that concern for the environment came up in every focus group and virtually every interview her firm conducted in 2007. Corresponding to that heightened concern was a higher level of interest in “greening” the kitchen – both building with green products and maintaining it with green cleaning products.

“We have been astounded by the passion and level of interest among all consumers concerning the environment in the past 19 months,” Albing says. “In the past, it always seemed like a passing fad. Today, it’s considered a lifestyle choice. Albing added that AIM will be conducting several more surveys before her Design Theater presentation to present more in-depth information at the Show. Her presentation is “The Green Kitchen – Fleeting Fad or Long-Term Trend? Implications for the Future.”

A complete schedule of Housewares Design Theater presentations is available at www.housewares.org/show/info/events.aspx.