

GOING GREEN

Businesses take aim at eco-conscious consumers

Big-box stores lead strong push to promote products

By **JOHN BOOTH**

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Green seems to be on consumers' brains. More than three-quarters of 2,077 respondents to an April 2008 survey by Findlay-based mystery shopping firm Corporate Research International said they had undertaken some energy-saving or environmentally friendly practices at home, ranging from turning lights off more frequently to recycling plastic grocery bags.

And businesses big and small are trying to turn that consumer intent into bottom-line retail success.

Aurora-based TCP Inc., which makes and sells energy-saving compact fluorescent light bulbs, has long been tying its corporate brand to energy conservation and sustainability, and it's gotten a boost from big-box retailers in helping to push its products to consumers.

"What you have are more and more retailers that are promoting this type of technology," company president Joseph Colant said. "(They) are adding shelf space and are able to do a better job promoting these types of products."

Wal-Mart and Home Depot both have undertaken corporate pushes to sell the bulbs made by TCP and other manufacturers: The former launched an initiative in 2007 to sell 100 million compact fluorescent light bulbs in a year, and the latter established an in-store "Eco Options" branding push.

TCP follows two marketing paths: One to reach the green-minded audience and one geared more toward selling the energy-saving — and hence, money-saving — message.

"There are definitely people who are early adopters to helping the environment," said TCP director of corporate communications Noel Lavezzi. "But there is definitely a broader group of people who think that there are higher costs associated with that, and they might not be as open to the green marketing."

A small price to pay

Theresa Brugler, a high school teacher who lives in West Akron, says as a consumer, she takes an interest in green products and those that promote sustainability, but it's not the driving force behind her shopping.

"Given a choice between something that is environmentally friendly and something that's not, I'll buy the thing that's better for the environment," Ms. Brugler said. "But I'm not one of those people that actively seeks it out."

Ms. Brugler said she and her husband have done things like replace many of their incandescent light bulbs with compact fluorescent light bulbs, even though the fluorescents are more expensive. Many eco-friendly goods tend to take a little more money out of consumers' wallets, even if they promote long-term savings or other benefits.

"I'm willing to pay a little bit more, but (not) if it's a huge amount," Ms. Brugler said. "The (CFL) light bulbs are a lot more, but they also last longer, so it pays off in the end. If it's a big purchase, if it's something we're going to use for years and years, I probably would pay more."

Rebecca Reynolds, president of Rocky River-based Green Clean, an environmentally friendly cleaning products business, and its retail counterpart, Planet Green, takes the long view when it comes to talking to potential customers about the higher price tags for green products and services.

"I think people are very confused right now," Ms. Reynolds said. "They're receiving a lot of messages, and they're getting overwhelmed. They think, 'I just couldn't possibly make all these (lifestyle) changes. It's hard getting people to realize that what looks cheap right now is not necessarily really the less expensive answer.'"

She started Green Clean seven years ago — back when the eco-marketing trend was so new that people assumed her last name was Green and she offered standard cleaning products.

"It's just within the last three years that people have been more receptive," Ms. Reynolds said. "Our phone rings off the hook in terms of people wanting Green Clean services."

That's what led her to open Planet Green about four months ago, and she says the store's been doing so well they've expanded their space. In addition to carrying the cleaning products that Green Clean uses, Planet Green sells items ranging from furniture to pet supplies, all either organic or recycled or otherwise eco-friendly.

"There's a whole humongous movement toward people who are willing to pay extra for things that will make their lives more sustainable and healthier," she said.

What goes around, comes around

Even Berea-based quick-oil-change business Lube Stop is marketing more environmentally sound services: This month, the company began offering an EcoGuard service, which fills engines with oil made from previously used and re-refined motor oil.

"One of the trends I think you're going to see emerge and continue to build is this concept of extending producer liability," Lube Stop president Tom Morley said. "Companies ... have to take more responsibility for their products throughout the entire life cycle."

The oil-change industry, he noted, has been collecting and reselling used motor oil for some

time, though it's often been used as a secondary fuel source for generators.

"What we're trying to do now is go a step further because I think the optimal use is to turn it back into a base oil and then turn it back into motor oil," Mr. Morley explained. "Instead of burning the stuff and having it go up into the atmosphere ... we're actually really getting close to a closed-loop product cycle."

At \$36.99, an EcoGuard oil change costs about \$4 more than the company's standard service offering. So far, Mr. Morley says EcoGuard changes account for about 10% of Lube Stop's oil changes overall.

"I'm encouraged so far with the initial response," Mr. Morley said. "I want it to be more, and I think we'll get there."



Stephen Bariska performs an EcoGuard oil change at Lube Stop's Seven Hills location. EcoGuard uses oil made from previously used and re-refined motor oil.

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