Using “Green” Premiums in Your Fundraising

Whether you call it “Going Green,” or “Ecologically Sound,” or “Earth Friendly,” Kermit the Frog had it right over 30 years ago: it isn’t easy being green. Whether you believe that choosing the right imprinted premiums for your drive will truly save the planet, or you’re convinced that being “green” is just the latest marketing hogwash, as a station fundraising professional, you need to know what the options, myths, and realities of “green” premiums are, and how they can impact your station fundraising.

There’s no denying that most everyone is getting on the green bandwagon these days. Likely, your audience members are beginning to ask about the sources, materials, and processes used in your station premiums. But it’s also equally clear that being “green” or “earth-friendly” is, at this point in time, a fuzzy concept: how green is “green,” and who determines what qualifies?

If you choose to include earth-friendly products in your mix of station premiums, you need to be aware of characteristics that define a “green” product, and you’ll need to be armed with information so you can intelligently answer questions from your members. And that’s where we can help! Rely on VisABILITY to find the right products, with the right characteristics, at the right prices, and we’ll help you understand the ins-and-outs of earth-friendly products.

The staff of VisABILITY recently attended the largest trade show in the industry devoted to imprinted products – hundreds of thousands of items displayed by thousands of suppliers. And almost without exception, all the suppliers touted their “green” products. Some of the claims were impressive – “nylon” bags made from 100% recycled plastic pop bottles, for example. Other claims were completely bogus – marketing fluff at its best.

You should know going in that, at this point in time, most “earth-friendly” products tend to be more expensive than their standard cousins. Sometimes the cost difference is minimal, other times it’s quite dramatic. And depending upon the type of product you’re using, you may find that your choices are more limited – in product colors, imprint techniques, and even sometimes in imprint colors. But VisABILITY can help you to navigate those waters, should you choose to “go green” with your drive.

In the paragraphs below, we’ll sort out some of the aspects of what it takes to be “green”:

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Recycled Products

You know there are literally thousands of different products available for imprinting. What's new is that many of those products are now made from recycled materials (or have recycled versions available). This is especially true in plastics and plastic-cousins, like nylon fabric. As mentioned above, a number of vendors are offering totes and other products made of "nylon" canvas which has been made from recycled pop bottles. Almost any type of paper product (notebooks, paper cubes, etc.) can be found using recycled papers. We've seen pens, frisbees, drinking cups, and other inexpensive plastic items made from recycled materials. We've even seen pencils made from recycled newspapers – you can still see the original printing!

One question to ask is how much recycled content is truly present in the product, and what the nature of the recycling is. We found one vendor who makes large hammocks and tents. They also make some small ditty bags that are "recycled" – from the scraps left over from the cutting room when making their larger items! While that may technically be "recycling," most of your contributors will probably think that's stretching the limits of the definition.

Totes made from recycled pop bottles.

Paper products will sometimes have 100% recycled content, but more often than not they have some percentage of recycled mixed with virgin fibers. Usually this is a function of the desired quality of the paper – recycled paper is of lesser quality than virgin paper, but a mixture of the two might be perfectly acceptable for the intended use. When buying, ask what the percentage of recycled content is. Functionally, the difference between 70% and 25% may not be much, but from a marketing perspective, the difference is huge. You don't want to proclaim your "greenness," only to be challenged because the percentage of recycled material is fairly low. These same principles apply to plastic products – what percentage of the plastic is new vs. recycled?

Organics

"Organic" is an even fuzzier concept than "recycled." No one is quite sure what "organic" means when it comes to products, much less how to standardize or certify it. But manufacturers are nonetheless ready to use that term on their products, if they think it'll help sell.

100% Organic T-Shirts

Usually, when talking about organics in the world of premiums, we're talking about the use of "organic cotton" in t-shirts, totebags, and other like products. Cotton is, of course, a remarkably versatile and relatively inexpensive fiber, used to make some wonderful items – who doesn't love the feel of a warm, thick, soft cotton towel against their skin? But it is also true that modern cotton farming, to be efficient and increase the crop yield (which drives down your prices), uses a large amount of pesticides, fertilizers, and a lot of water.

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Proponents of organic cotton often make one of two claims, sometimes both: first, traditional cotton has residual bad stuff in it from the fertilizers, etc., and therefore you don't want it touching your skin. (A claim that, as far as we know, has never really been proven or that poses such a minuscule risk, it's irrelevant.) The second claim is that traditional cotton-growing techniques result in groundwater runoff that threatens waterways and ecosystems, or that the pesticides damage the soil and possibly poison other species besides the targeted insects. These claims are probably true to an extent, though the traditional growers will tell you they do a lot of things these days to control and minimize those impacts.

Nevertheless, the organic cotton option purports to solve those problems by eschewing chemicals, and sometimes in also reducing the amount of irrigation so less water is needed and less runs off into the ecosystem. The natural byproduct of these methods, of course, is that their crop yields are lower, so their prices must be higher – which of course gets passed on to you as the purchaser.

Another aspect to consider when choosing organic cotton products is that your choice of product colors may be limited. Almost all organic cotton is left undyed and unbleached, meaning that your only choice is the "natural" color, which looks sort of like oatmeal. Some manufacturers are beginning to use vegetable and other natural dyes to add color to organics, but your choices still remain limited as compared to standard cotton products.

100% Organic Cotton Tote

That's not to say that organic cotton products are a bad choice – as more and more of the industry offers organic options, more and more growers will begin to provide organically-grown cotton, which should help to reduce the costs. We even know of one shirt manufacturer in Texas that grows its own organic cotton, takes it to its own mill, and produces its own products – with complete control over the whole process.

Other organic products are also available: we've seen organic lip balms and hand lotions, for example. (Lip balms are a popular giveaway item at trade shows, fair booths, etc.) The organic balms are made of beeswax and other natural substances. But, there's a catch – if you want SPF protection, you sacrifice your "100% organic" label, because the SPF factor comes from added chemicals that are not organic. (You can buy 100% organic lip balm without the SPF protection.)

As with recycled products, when you pursue organics as part of your product mix, you need to ask yourself what percentage of the product is actually organic. Not all "organic" t-shirts or totebags are 100% organic. Many have some blend of traditional cotton, or sometimes even some polyester, woven in.

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Renewables

A small but growing part of the "earth-friendly" trend is a move towards using materials from renewable resources. We see a lot of little electronic gadgets and gizmos that are solar powered, for example. But the prime example of this is the use of bamboo (and sometimes hemp) fibers for garments, totes, hats, and other cloth products.

Because bamboo grows, quite literally, like a weed (up to a foot a day in some parts of the world), it's a fiber that can be harvested over and over again with minimal impact to the environment. (Of course, technically, cotton is a renewable source, too, but it's just not as sexy-sounding.)

Bamboo fibers also have some interesting characteristics when it comes to fabrics: it's very soft, almost silky, so it feels luxurious, and it has natural moisture-wicking properties, so it's comfortable to wear. At the last trade show, we saw the biggest, thickest, most luxurious bath towel you've ever seen – made of bamboo fibers! It felt like silk, but was thick and warm. (It was also very expensive!).

100% Bamboo Towels

Hemp is similar to bamboo, in that it grows easily and readily all over the world. However, hemp fibers are coarser, and yield a heavier, rougher garment – not too rough to wear, of course, but definitely a different feeling.

The problem, at this point, is that because bamboo and hemp are both emerging slowly in the marketplace, the costs are high, and the supply lines are iffy. Many vendors are offering bamboo or bamboo-blend products, but so far we've been disappointed with their ability to deliver on promises. So, for now, keep these as an option in the back of your mind, and we'll continue to monitor the market and let you know when we find a good, reliable supplier we can stand behind.

Another example of products made from renewables: mugs made from "corn plastic." Without going into the chemistry of it, "corn plastic" is exactly what the name implies – a plastic substance made from corn. (Or, more accurately, lactic acid derived from corn.) Corn plastic mugs, and other items, have a few benefits to tout: first, the stuff is made from a renewable resource (corn!); second, it's NOT made from oil, lessening demand for foreign crude; third, it is compostable and biodegradable, at least in theory; and fourth, almost all of it is USA made. Of course, there's no free lunch – corn, as we've all learned as E85 fuels have taken off, requires an awful lot of energy and, yes, petroleum, to grow. And if you do an internet search on "corn plastic," you find that the stuff is not as easy to biodegrade as perhaps advertised. But, all that being said, these products provide another option for presenting a "green" image.

"Corn Plastic" Mug

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Earth-friendly Manufacturing

Another aspect of "being green" is in the way products are made. Many manufacturers are taking steps, big and small, to reduce the environmental impact of their manufacturing processes. This can be as simple as reducing the amount of packaging materials they use, to completely revamping their processes.

A case in point: the Gildan company has, by many measures, become the largest worldwide supplier of t-shirts (and other garments) for imprinting, surpassing Hanes. It produces high-quality garments at good prices – one of the reasons it has become our favorite supplier of t-shirts. But, it does not offer any organic products.

Biological Water Treatment Facility

Instead, Gildan has concentrated on its manufacturing processes, reducing the environmental impact of those processes. In fact, it has won awards and certifications for the things it has done, and is widely held as a model for corporate environmental responsibility. Among Gildan's achievements: at its plants in Honduras and the Dominican Republic, it uses a biological wastewater treatment system for its used dye-batch water. The system involves a series of six lagoons; by the time the water gets to the third lagoon, it's as clean as when Gildan took the water into the factory. By the time the water leaves the sixth lagoon, it's drinkable! It's so clean, in fact, that birds and other wildlife that hadn't been seen in the area for years have started to return, using the wastewater lagoons as their homes. And the clean water is then released back into the system, to support the irrigation efforts of area farmers.

Despite the fact that Gildan doesn't offer products that are recycled or organic, it may be making a more important environmental impact than some of its competitors who do offer those products. So, can we label them an "earth-friendly" supplier, or not? (See, we told you this wasn't going to be easy.)

Product Safety

On a tangent from being green is the issue of product safety. The widespread toy and food recalls of the past year teach us that we have to be careful in sourcing our products. A big concern in the industry today revolves around California Proposition 65, which is a consumer safety measure.

Proposition 65 was passed by California voters many years ago. The law requires that manufacturers and distributors of products in California identify any potentially hazardous substances in their products, and if such substance exist, provide a warning label to warn the consumer of the situation. A typical warning label on a ceramic mug, for example, might read:

"WARNING: The materials used as colored decorations on the exterior of this product contain lead compounds and/or cadmium, which are chemicals known to the State of California to cause cancer or birth defects or other reproductive harm."

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Note that the law doesn't require the removal of any of the substances – just a warning to the consumer. But here's the rub: if you look hard enough, it's possible to find dangerous substances in virtually everything in our modern life. Unfortunately, California has set exposure standards so strict, there is virtually no product that doesn't require some sort of warning label. (The California standards, by the way, are far more strict than federal guidelines which apply in the rest of the country.) Some would argue that these warning labels and signs have become so ubiquitous in California that the warning has lost all effect. Nevertheless, the law is vigorously enforced.

How does Prop 65 impact your premiums? For the better, actually – since California is such a large market, few product manufacturers can afford to ignore the market. (Although some do – we know of one ceramics decorator whose catalog explicitly states: "we do not sell to California.") And since no manufacturer wants to run the risk of being sued over minuscule amounts of chemicals which may or may not be in their products, there's a movement afoot to change and adapt products to meet the California standards.

A prime example is the ceramics industry: those ceramic inks used to print your design on a mug is a chemical goo – most of it actually looks brown when applied, and only when the mugs are fired in a kiln at 1200° or higher does the chemical reaction take place which brings out the color, which is then fused into the glass surface of the glaze. Reds and purples particularly rely on lead, cadmium, and other elements to bring out vibrant colors.

To avoid legal exposure, more and more companies are now switching their ink formulations to reduce or eliminate the bad chemicals altogether. So-called "organic" inks or "No-Lead" inks are becoming more and more common in the industry; indeed, some manufacturers now specialize in them. The downside is that these newer inks just don't have the same range of colors available, and the available colors just aren't as bright as previous versions.

Another example: we know of one tote manufacturer that has moved away from traditional vinyls and other plastics towards more eco-friendly versions, especially in products like coolers where there's a chance food might come in contact with the product. You and I probably won't notice any difference, but the change is being made, for the better.

Another class of products undergoing changes is water bottles. You may have heard that there is some question about the safety of polycarbonate water bottles (Nalgene and similar). The general consensus is, in normal usage, there is no safety risk – this has been confirmed numerous times by safety agencies around the world since polycarbonate was first invented almost 80 years ago. But, because of recent publicity about the slight chance of a problem under certain circumstances, some manufacturers are now looking for new formulations for their plastics which will do away with the perceived or real issues with polycarbonates. And, of course, the makers of alternative products, such as stainless steel bottles, are quick to pounce on consumer mistrust in one category to tout the benefits of their products.

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What does this all mean to you as a premium buyer? Not much, really (unless you happen to be in California). You can rest assured that VisABILITY will always offer products that have been deemed safe by the relevant regulatory agencies. And we're always happy to share what we know with you, so you can keep your members informed.

As we said at the beginning, it isn't easy being green. And the hardest part about being eco-conscious in your premium purchases is in doing your homework about the products. As the marketplace changes, we'll continue to keep our eyes open for new products, and new versions of old standbys. We'll keep you posted anytime significant issues affect your premium choices. And we're always ready to help you sort through the issues to make intelligent choices. Rely on VisABILITY to be your premium partner now, and in the future.

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