



Redefining green

By Matthew White

For many years, Europe has led the world in sustainability, moving the debate from social conscience to legislation and national targets, setting parameters for much of Europe's current business activity. But despite having helped pioneer a 'green revolution', many European companies are finding that being more sustainable is both complex and challenging.

For many organisations the first step is to 'just find renewable raw materials' that can replace existing materials, or reduce materials use. Whilst this is part of the approach, it takes a narrow view of what sustainability can mean and also assumes that current materials can be replaced through a simple swap. Having been active in this area for many years, we have found that a more holistic approach to sustainability – considering design, technology, the consumer and the brand – can open up numerous opportunities.

Minimising environmental impact is an obvious starting point, but not just through

using less, or different raw materials. Areas often overlooked include changing manufacturing processes and reducing water usage. With water availability likely to become a headline global concern in the medium term, making better use of this resource could be particularly important.

For some brands social sustainability is a key element of the message to consumers, Fairtrade products are a good example. Protecting endangered flora and fauna that have relevance to the brand and the consumer may also allow consumers to 'do their bit' while buying products.

Sustainable initiatives face multiple challenges; although many consumers do value green credentials, they are often unwilling to sacrifice product quality or performance, or pay a premium, to go 'green'. Existing products have been developed to address all of these criteria and sustainable alternatives are often focused on cost or performance but not on combining multiple technologies to deliver complex functionality.

Problems also occur when you start looking at whole life sustainability as many renewable materials are not recyclable and indeed can disrupt existing recycling

streams. Rigorous assessment of the impact of potential changes is required to prevent accusations of greenwashing. We are aware of numerous examples of lifecycle analysis demonstrating that existing practices are actually more sustainable than an apparently 'greener' alternative – perhaps because it requires more transport or more material to achieve the desired functionality. In these situations the realisation that other approaches to sustainability have real value to the consumer, for example through protection of natural resources or some other socially sustainable approach, may enable a brand to still build green credentials.

Whilst the consumer sector is definitely leading the way, other industries are also adopting a more holistic approach to sustainability, driven by legislation, potential efficiency savings, or the product differentiation that sustainability can provide. Medical companies, for example, are currently responding to government-led carbon reduction programmes which focus on public sector facilities such as hospitals. As a result, future sales of mature medical products may depend less on incrementally better performance, and more on reducing packaging, recyclability or the manufacturing process' carbon footprint.

Society now expects widespread commitment to green values. Many businesses however are finding sustainability not as straightforward as it first appeared. They are now discovering that it is possible to develop realistic, meaningful sustainability strategies that do not compromise market share, or product performance, and which make a real contribution to the environment and to the bottom line.

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