

Eco-friendly merchandising makes for 'green' Christmas

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Looking for that last-minute Christmas gift?

How about putting 15 dollars' worth of wind energy under the tree? Why not slip some "carbon offsets" into the children's stockings? Everyone needs a beluga whale ring tone for their cell phones, right?

Environmentalists and "green-leaning" companies are exploring novel ways to connect with consumers, empower the public and raise money for causes that typically wouldn't cross the minds of mall-bound holiday shoppers.



HOWARD LIPIN / Union-Tribune

Whole Foods Markets says sales of Wind Power Cards, sold in denominations of \$5 for individual energy use and \$15 for families, have been "great."

Concepts such as offering symbolic adoptions of pandas have been around for years, but this season's hottest eco-gifts claim to combat global warming. Some products are even shipped "carbon neutral." That means for a small surcharge, certain companies promise to plant a tree that will absorb the carbon dioxide pollution generated by delivering the goods.

More eco-based merchandising ideas are catching on because of the remorse and helplessness that many Americans feel about global warming, which is greatly caused by the use of fossil fuels. Now, people can try to combat climate change when they go to the grocery store, order flowers online or visit a ski resort.

"Everybody is looking for ways to have a guilt-free life – and ideally without having to change anything" in their daily routines, said Joel Makower of Oakland, the founder of GreenBiz.com and a commentator on conservation and commerce. "The most cynical view is that everyone is trying to find ways to shop our way to environmental health."

Typically, consumers must have faith that their money is going to a worthy group or cause located hundreds or even thousands of miles away. There is scant government oversight of the fragmented and small but expanding industry that pitches eco-friendly products.

For instance, no regulatory agency makes sure that a tree really is planted when customers pay what amounts to a self-imposed ecology tax to an organization touting carbon offsets.

"It's a challenging market to explain to customers, but we are seeing pretty rapid growth in the number of products offered and the volume of sales," said Dan Lieberman, director of clean energy policies at the Center for Resource Solutions in San Francisco. The center is one group that certifies whether renewable energy vendors do what they promise.

Statistics indicating the size of the overall eco-gifts market are hard to come by. For the carbon-reduction market targeted

at consumers, analysts said about 100,000 people in the United States bought carbon offsets this year and perhaps 1 million purchase “green power” annually from their electricity providers, said Eric Carlson, executive director at Carbonfund.org in Silver Spring, Md., a nonprofit provider of carbon offsets.

The organization allows donors to pay for a variety of carbon-reduction efforts, including reforestation and solar energy projects. Carlson said contributions to his group are booming, particularly during this holiday season.

“We are currently crushed” by demand for carbon offsets, Carlson said. “It’s definitely our best month ever.”

Despite such optimism, some merchandising experts said the eco-friendly retail industry needs to bolster its credibility and be careful about over-the-top claims.

“Marketers recognize climate change as yet another way to differentiate their products,” Makower said. “What we don’t want to see happen is to see a consumer backlash resulting from Americans thinking that this is just another scam.”

Besides the possibility of fraud, some environmental advocates worry that persuading consumers to pay more to counteract their pollution may undermine long-term environmental progress.

“I think people should really make some changes in their lifestyle rather than paying someone else to do it,” said Sofia Gidlund, a global warming activist for the San Diego Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Sarah Clusen Buecher said carbon offsets are better than nothing. She donated to Carbonfund.org to atone for the energy wasted by her drafty home in San Francisco.

“I feel slightly less guilty, but there is still a lot to do,” Buecher said.

Renewable energy experts commonly compare the emerging marketplace of “green” credits to buying organic produce. Customers might not notice anything unusual about their purchase, but they pay a premium because they trust that organic fruits and vegetables were farmed without toxic chemicals.

A similar idea is behind the Wind Power Card that Whole Foods Markets started offering last month in many of its outlets, including those in California. The product’s slogan: “Give the gift of clean air.”

The cards, located near checkout counters, are based on how much energy customers use at home per month. Individual cards cost \$5 and cards for families cost \$15.

The certificates say the purchaser has paid the extra amount of money that it takes to produce wind power compared with conventional fossil-fuel electricity. The money is supposed to go to wind-based electricity farms nationwide.

“Since it is physically impossible to deliver electricity from a wind farm directly to your house ... (buying the card) ensures that the electricity you use is replaced onto the national power grid with wind energy,” according to Renewable Choice Energy, the Colorado company that markets the cards.

In other words, wind-generated electricity won’t necessarily heat the purchaser’s toaster, but the transaction is supposed to send a signal to power companies about what customers want.

“It doesn’t have any taste or feel or smell, but it has a real impact on the market,” said Lieberman, whose center certifies Renewable Choice Energy.

Whole Foods would not disclose sales figures of the Wind Power Card, but a spokeswoman said they are “great.

Similar efforts to reduce carbon dioxide are popping up worldwide.

In the summer, Travelocity.com and Expedia.com unwrapped programs that allow customers to compensate for air pollution generated by trips they purchase on those Web sites. Since then, other businesses have followed suit.

The Conservation Fund said a \$10 payment on Travelocity.com negates the carbon emissions created by the average trip for one person, which consists of air travel, a one-night hotel stay and the use of a rental car. The money goes to reforestation projects in Louisiana and Mississippi, said a spokeswoman for the group.

Carolyn Chase, organizer of San Diego County’s annual EarthFair celebration, said she bought such carbon offsets for a

trip to England after making sure the forest that was supposed to benefit from her money actually existed.

“It gives you a fairly cheap and easy way to help reduce your impacts,” she said. “I hope it's not just a feel-good exercise.”

Environmentally conscious people just might feel better with an unusual – and free – product being offered this season by the Center for Biological Diversity. The Arizona-based environmental group focuses on endangered species.

This week, it unveiled a Web site where users can download what the center advertises as “mesmerizing, heartfelt, and – dare we say? – operatic calls” of some 40 imperiled animals for cell phone ring tones. The group plans to feature dozens more animal jingles on the site.

Even if the sounds don't immediately generate donations, they advertise the center's work every time the phone rings, said Jeff Miller, the group's Bay Area wild-lands coordinator.

“It's one thing for them to read about (species),” he said. “But if they get to hear the call or the sound, it really grabs people.”

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