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 A Biennial Green Ad Language Study  
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100 GREEN ADS / A Biennial Green Ad Language Study

THE SOAP GROUP

SOAP



## PROCESS

The process for this survey follows the same process used in previous years.

1. We collected 70 different print magazines from consumer, trade and special interest categories published between April 2010 and February 2011. Not all publications surveyed contained a sufficient ad to include in this survey. The publications included a broad spectrum of interests, markets and ideologies. For this report, we reviewed the following publications:

BusinessWeek	Nation
Atlantic Monthly	National Geographic
Architectural Digest	National Review
Better Homes & Gardens	Natural Health
Cat Fancy	Natural Home
Coastal Living	Newsweek
Consumer Reports	O –The Oprah Magazine
Consumers Digest	Orion
Cooking Light	Out
Details Magazine	Outside
Discover	Parenting
Downeast Magazine	MacWorld
Entertainment Weekly	Ranger Rick
ESPN	Reader's Digest
Every Day	Real Simple
Fast Company	Redbook
GOOD	Rolling Stone
GQ	Scientific American
Gourmet	Self
Green Money Journal	Shape
Handyman	SmartMoney
Harpers	Smithsonian
Health	Spin
Inc.	Sports Illustrated
Kiplinger's Personal Finance	Sports Illustrated for Kids
Martha Stewart Living	Tattoo
Maxim	Parenting
Men's Health	The New Yorker
Money	The Week
Mother Jones	Time
MotherEarth News	PC Magazine
	TV Guide
	Utne Reader
	Vanity Fair
	Wired
	World

2. Each ad within each publication was scanned for references to sustainability, the environment, social issues and corporate social responsibility (CSR). This year is the first we have included CSR initiatives or messaging in the preliminary scan. This is due to an increase in its use as a marketing message/differentiator.
3. Ads with reference to the specified focus were then catalogued in a database. The data captured for each ad included the following:

Publication Name	Operative 2 Usage
Publication Date	Operative 3
Genre	Operative 3 Usage
Advertiser	Operative 4
Product	Operative 4 Usage
Product Category	General Notes
Operative 1	
Operative 1 Usage	
Operative 2	

Product categories for this report include:

Automotive	Home Goods
Brand	Pets
Drug/Alcohol	Professional Services
Energy	Technology/Software
Entertainment	Tourism
Financial	Apparel
Food	
Hard Goods	
Health and Beauty	

4. The database of 100 entries was then studied for patterns, discrepancies and trends.

Some Rules:

1. Food ads that reference "healthy" were not classified as Green ads.
2. Car ads that reference "healthy" were classified as Green ads.
3. Language was the driver. Ads that simply used natural images but had no sustainability messaging were not included in the language survey, though we do reference the use of Green imagery with the absence of Green language in our findings.
4. The report intentionally does not reference or quote directly from ads, instead taking trends in the aggregate and extrapolating these into our modern culture.



## 2009 REPORT SUMMARY

In 2009, the most frequently used operative word used in Green advertising was the word “less.”

Its use was a reflection of a slow economy as manifested through Green messaging. In nearly 70% of the uses of “less” it was conjoined with its opposite “more.” ‘Use Less Energy. Save More Money.’ was a popular construct for hybrid technologies, automobiles, smart meters and one-stop shopping.

“Less” was also code for “conserve” which had been marred by anti-environmentalists as equated with sacrifice. We had yet to experience, linguistically, the resilience of “efficiency” as a meme.

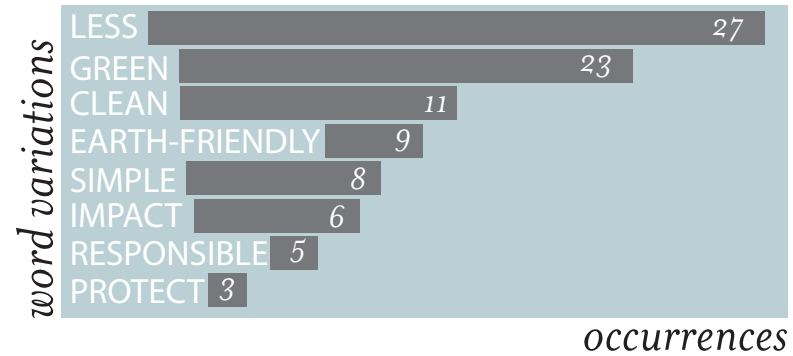
Prior to 2009, it had been evidenced in other marketing studies that “Green consumers” wanted numbers and technical data to back up Green marketing claims. In 2009, we decided to explore this by looking at emotional Green language versus technical Green language.

Indeed, science-derived words were used 168 times as opposed to emotional words at 116. Historically, emotional words have been the preferred choice of the environmental ad. A sense of hubris has always dominated environmental messages, where humans are the caretakers of the earth and responsible for “saving” or “protecting” the planet. In 2009, science took over.

The 2009 study showed a decided shift as lighter words like “green” became replaced with “sustainability.” The shift was in one sense a moment of maturation for the movement.

## MOST COMMON EMOTIONAL WORDS/WORD VARIATIONS

2009 SOAP GROUP SURVEY OF ADVERTISING LANGUAGE



## MOST COMMON TECHNICAL WORDS/WORD VARIATIONS

2009 SOAP GROUP SURVEY OF ADVERTISING LANGUAGE





## 2011 DETAILS

### LACK

The most striking finding in the 2011 survey was the general dearth of Green ads in general. Ads promoting aspects of sustainability as a primary element were simply harder to find. This is likely due in part to advertising budget cut-backs. Ads tended to be focused on Direct Response drivers as opposed to secondary benefits or corporate branding. As ad dollars became scarcer they were focused on more measurable mediums (online) and call-to-action (Direct Response).

Green messaging simply did not make the cut of priorities for most. While many reports show an overall increase in magazine print ad spending in 2010, advertisers were clearly choosing more conventional positions.

In 2009 22% of all ads surveyed included Green language in at least body copy describing the attributes or benefits of the product, service or company. In 2011 only 9% of all ads surveyed mentioned any sustainability attributes.

Sustainability is still visible, but it has been linguistically diminished.

*“We are what we pretend to be,  
so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.”*

- Kurt Vonnegut in the 1966 introduction to Mother Night

More culturally, this lack may signal a moment were Green has become yet another in a list of product attributes. The fervor over Green may have subsided. This may not be a bad thing.



*“We speak about color, form, shape, etc.,  
as if they possessed self-sufficient being...”*

- Cultural Critic, Slavoj Žižek

## IMPLIED\*

The previous findings point to a lack of Green language in print advertising. This is not to say that there was a lack of Green in the ads, just that there was linguistic scarcity. Visually, products of all categories were depicted sitting in forests, fresh fields and other natural surroundings.

This is the face of greenwashing today. As opposed to making Green claims (substantiated or not), a trend emerges that it is still seemingly important to associate products with a clean, natural environment. The job has moved from the Copywriter to the Creative Director and Set Stylist. Colors, shapes, form and stylized photo shoot locations have replaced language as to provide the spectacle of sustainability. Legally, this seems a much safer and subtler strategy.

Language and logo design are about reduction – a reducing of complex elements into memorable, digestible implications. We see this first hand with the removal of Green language and its replacement with Green image.

These pastoral images were most often unrelated to product attributes or performance. Language in the ads usually made no reference to sustainability whatsoever. From car tires to cosmetics to vinyl windows to servers, products were placed in natural environments yet made no environmental claims. In some instances, a simple iconic image (e.g. a leaf) garnished an ad with no reference to sustainability.

Sustainability has become an alien landscape where products reside. For the darker Green consumer this may or may not suffice. After all, shopping is an emotional act, rather than an intellectual one in most cases. For the lightest of the Green demographic, this shift may be “just enough” Green.

*\*It should be noted that these ads were not included in the overall language survey, but the trend should be recognized.*



## HIDDEN

In 2009, Green language was used as a primary driver in headlines and other featured copy. In 2011, Green attributes and advantages are blended into body copy. This is in alignment with some strategic marketing consultants who claim that all other product features and benefits must be in place, and that Green is an added bonus that sways consumers. Green has become an added benefit, as opposed to the focus. The intentional hierarchy of the placement of the Green messages has shifted dramatically.

*“The hierarchy of relations, from the molecular structure of carbon to the equilibrium of the species and ecological whole, will perhaps be the leading idea of the future.”* - Joseph Needham, British Scientist, Historian and Sinologist

“How visible is enough?” is an important question for the sustainability movement and marketers. In the surge to push product (advertising), how relevant is the message as it matures? This rapid maturation is introducing a new complexity to the species of the Green ad in a sort of Green Progeria.

In an advertisement for an apparel company known for its sustainable positioning, there was almost no mention of sustainability. The only trace of sustainability could be found within a photograph where customers (presumably) were labeled. One man in the photograph was labeled as an “Environmental Crusader”. The brand felt no obligation to make any Green claims (they could focus their language on other features) and yet still imply that Green people purchase their product.

In general, however, Green language has been folded into other features and benefits (consumer health, for example). This finding can be viewed from two perspectives:

- + Green has matured past a marketing fad and is now interwoven with other features and benefits.
- Sustainability is simply no longer a driving force in the consumer purchase decision-making process.



## LOCAL

Not surprisingly, Blue Chip corporations focused on their scale and reach in the face of solving global problems. They frequently used the word “world” as opposed to “global” – but the denotation is the same only friendlier. In almost all cases, however, the solution to the “world’s most pressing challenges” was local.

“Local” was a popular phrase in terms of being part of the solution to the problems created by a previous lack of sustainable behavior.

One popular model for this was to ask readers if they knew where X was produced. The implication was, of course, that the more local the more sustainable the product. It should be noted that all of the ads surveyed were in national publications.

Several ads presented their CSR initiatives as “working with local communities” even though the context of the ad was about world problems. This is plausible as a sustainability strategy, and echoes the “Think Global Act Local” mantra going back to the late 1960’s.

This trend was also represented in campaigns focusing on crowdsourcing philanthropy to local or popular (popularity is a new form of “trust” normally implied by “local” in an increasingly virtual tribe culture) causes (Pepsi) or technology transfers from corporations to customer recommended local problems that could be solved with the technology (Toyota).

“Local” has become code for sustainable.

Culturally, “Local” is a framing of “the known” as opposed to away and the unknown, and was often reinforced by the pastoral and expected images of a family farm. This can be seen in the resurgence of farmers markets. Consumers start to explore new meanings for the concept of local, to tighter circles. As of mid-2010, there were 6,132 farmers markets operating throughout the U.S. This is a 16 percent increase from 2009. There are 4,300 Walmarts.

*“A local company has more accountability.”*

- Paul Hawken, Best Selling Author of Blessed Unrest



## IDEAS

Blue Chip corporations looking to capitalize on scale and newly minted CSR reports, leveraged their ad dollars as an opportunity to introduce themselves as “innovative.”

Being innovative is not a new messaging strategy. But in the context of sustainability it has started to play a more dominant role. This is seemingly part of the evolution of sustainability in general – it has become more complex.

*“Just as energy is the basis of life itself, and ideas the source of innovation, so is innovation the vital spark of all human change, improvement and progress.”*

- Theodore Levitt, Economist credited with coining the term “globalization.”

Common language included: “innovative solutions” “untapped resources” “new energy” “modern conditions.”

Common themes included: “the end of old ways of business” “broken systems (requiring new thought).”

As “green” was the operative trend in 2007, and “less” in 2009, then “innovation” was the dominant theme in 2011. (“green” was recorded only twice in this study.)

“Innovation” was a common word and an important one at that. As the concept of sustainability moves from obvious fixes to requiring the more complex, differentiation will become more difficult. We will continue to see the concept of “innovation” take a more prominent position, as concrete answers become less clear.

Culturally, this emergence is not surprising. It’s not unlike energy efficiency. The first 40% of efficiency (perhaps sustainability in general) was the easiest. But by now we have changed the light bulbs and weatherized the proverbial house. The next 40% will get progressively more complex and challenging. It will require new technologies, processes, innovations and ways to measure impact. Marketing faces the same complexity.



## TOGETHER

One exception to the void of Green ads in general were those produced by Blue Chip corporations; which focused on promoting their corporate citizenship and their ability to solve large problems along with their customers.

“We” “Together” “Us” were all used in reference to corporations and their customers.

This is somewhat of a departure from years past, specifically in light of “collaboration.” Blue Chips have often positioned themselves as lone wolves able to solve problems for customers. More frequently today, there seems to be movement (or, at least, positioning) towards working with customers. Today however, they are using “we” to imply themselves, their supply chain and customers, as opposed to the singular collective “we” of the past.

*“Collaboration is the new competition.”*

- Alex Bogusy, Founder of Fearless Revolution

This is also reflected culturally in the availability of crowdsourcing and access to individuals. Consider Kickstarter, Pepsi’s Refresh Challenge, and Toyota’s campaign promoting the transferring of their technology to individuals who want to use it to solve social problems.



## THE REAL

The concept of heirloom design of goods and services is emerging in the face of a disposable, single-serving culture. As it starts to become an emergent trend in the dialogue around sustainability, our language starts to reflect the trend. Most importantly, is the more prevalent introduction of the concept of Authenticity. This shows up in the popular literal use of the words “authentic” and “real,” but more critically in the re-contextualizing of words like “all-natural” and “nature.”

*“I do not believe in pure idioms. I think there is naturally a desire, for whoever speaks or writes, to sign in an idiomatic, irreplaceable manner.”*

- Jacques Derrida, Philosopher

Reality is an emerging trend in marketing in general as we continue to live and work in an increasingly virtual world. We see this in throw-back soda ingredients, nostalgic logo t-shirts, retro packaging designs, steampunk aesthetics, and the emerging craft culture.

While products in the Food category have always used phrases like “all-natural” in their product claims, there is a new framing. Historically, “all-natural” has been a kind of code for “more healthy.” Today it seems to refer more to the customer’s entire lifestyle and not just the health benefits of the product. It has attempted to become “wholesome,” “real,” and therefore more valuable.

“All-natural” was also used as an implied certification mark, sometimes even being represented as a visual stamp. In all cases, “nature” was implied to be more “real” than the alternative.

“Natural” was the most popular word in the 2011 survey of Green ads. “Real” was used as a modifier to ingredients and employees, in direct juxtaposition to synthetic and artificial competitors.

The inverse was true as well. In some cases “sustainable” was used as a kind of certification of authenticity.



## CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Messaging around sustainability has evolved and so has the culture that will accept or reject those messages. The trite “go green” and “it’s not easy being green” has all but vanished with the exception of blatantly late-to-the-party participants.

The maturity of the message is an indication of the market. While Green is not yet a ubiquitous feature, it is, at the end of the day, just another product feature. Misplacing this feature within your feature-benefit hierarchy is a missed opportunity for relevancy and a potential risk for inauthenticity.

2. Advertisers must acknowledge that the easiest days of sustainability are behind us. The next wave of the aggregate sustainability movement will need to integrate the various intra-movements (energy, social issues, textiles, health, city design, etc.).

Part of the maturation is acknowledging the complexity of the problem. “Going green” was always an over simplification of the solution, and Blue Chip companies are using their ad dollars to present their companies as part of a new complex solution.

These are times of great opportunity for business leaders who can authentically align their core business practice with legitimate solutions — and then develop engagement programs for customers to play a role beyond the transactional relationship. Building these trans-transactional relationships is a missed sustainability strategy that can be activated by the marketing team. To learn more about Authenticity as a lever to improve business and CSR performance visit [authenticatingreal.com](http://authenticatingreal.com).

4. There is a trace of sustainability left in the messaging – a footprint of a larger thing. We take this in part as an indication of the mainstreaming of the message. Simply, it is no longer novel. This is a positive moment for the concept of sustainability within our culture. It also creates space for what will become the next phase. Solutions are not easy to come by, and the language of advertising supports this. These ads are filled with “promise” and “future” and the need for “innovation.” Old rules no longer apply. We are moving forward.

*“Everything is arranged so that it be this way, this is what is called culture.”*

- Philosopher Jacques Derrida

3. Rarely has advertising been accused of being too truthful. Transparency is a new concept to the marketing community. And the way they seem to be mitigating this is through selective doses of authenticity, or the appearance thereof. As consumers begin to enjoy sharing experiences with brands, concepts like collaboration and authenticity begin to merge and emerge as marketing strategies.

Green language has indeed matured, but perhaps too quickly. This rapid maturation is introducing a new complexity to the species of the Green ad in a sort of Green Progeria – a premature aging resulting in linguistically fragile bodies and weak hearts. Green marketers should take note of the complexity and design promotions, campaigns and brand platforms accordingly.



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For more information please visit the following websites:

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- MoreThanPromote.com
- AuthenticatingReal.com
- Ecohegemony.com

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{ Market reports are aggregates of information. If you would like a custom translation of the linguistic landscape prepared for your category, brand or product, please email John Rooks at [jrooks@thesoapgroup.com](mailto:jrooks@thesoapgroup.com) to discuss your sustainability language strategy. }