



# The Daily Gleaner

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## **Actions Speak Louder Than Words**

The last few years have seen a dramatic increase in companies that market their environmental actions as a way to increase sales. The problem, however, is that many of those marketing activities are not backed up with real action. If they were, perhaps we'd be further ahead in dealing with our current environmental situation.

A main issue is that customers have trouble quickly assessing their environmental impact – in fact, it's almost impossible. Decisions such as whether it is environmentally better to wash dishes by hand or in a dishwasher are not straightforward. They include so many variables that it seems an insurmountable task to answer the question absolutely.

Marketers have taken advantage of this realizing that most consumers don't have the time, resources or background to investigate claims. Certain statements can be very misleading, while other corporate policies and practices may be loosely enforced.

It's hard to take a company seriously when a sign next to the napkin container reads "For the sake of the environment, please take only one" while at the same time staff are putting ten napkins, and vastly excessive amounts of condiments into every take out bag.

Tim Hortons say "Go Green. Grab a handle" to promote their reusable mugs. Living with a tea addict, I've had ample opportunity to see that more often than not, drinks are poured into a disposable cup before being poured into the reusable mug. Over 50 complaints have resulted in a variety of excuses from "So?" to "We need to measure it" to "It's corporate policy for health and safety reasons".

E-mails to corporate customer service say that "Through our ongoing training programs, our staff are instructed that all hot beverage refills should be poured directly into the customer's travel mug." Clearly these training programs aren't effective, and my response has been to stop spending money at their restaurants.

A personal favourite of mine is the "All Natural" advertisements. Oil and coal are natural, but that doesn't mean that burning them is a good thing, nor is filling the Gulf of Mexico with them. There are a variety of all natural cleaning products that are more damaging than synthetic alternatives when sent down the drain.

Customers have become very adept at making decisions based on price. I believe that we need to incorporate environmental performance into price to make the customers decision easier.

Germany's Packaging Ordinance introduced in 1991 requires that manufacturers take responsibility for packaging at the end of a product's life. In practice this is done by contributing to a Green Dot fund that actually carries out the packaging collection, recycling and disposal. The fee paid depends on the weight of the packaging and the types of materials used. The result is that there is an instant economic incentive for companies to reduce packaging and use lower impact materials.

When it comes to corporate policies and practices, it's essential that the importance of these policies are instilled in all employees. Simply creating a corporate policy does not usually translate to behavioural changes in employees.

There are good examples out there. I've heard of employees at lululemon stores reminding customers who ask for bags that they could have brought a reusable bag or could probably carry their purchase or put them in an existing bag.

That only happens in a company that clearly identifies – and believes in - the environment as a priority. It's good to see programs like Fredericton's Green Shops program help local businesses make it one.

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