

Eco-Cleaners:
Clorox and Windex to the Rescue?

According to Good Housekeeping, the most frequently bought green products are Household cleaners. 38% of the respondents have purchased green household-cleaning products. This is more than those that bought recycled paper products with high post-consumer-content, and three times the amount that bought organic food products. This statistic is fortunate, as household cleaners account for almost 1/9 of municipal hazardous waste.¹

Additionally, 75% proclaimed they would be interested in purchasing household-cleaning products in environmentally-friendly packaging.² This must be what Arm & Hammer was looking at when it launched a new line of household cleaners in September 2008. The products come in refillable containers, sporting biodegradable packaging that contains 85% less plastic than a whole bottle. The first purchase includes an empty spray bottle and a 'just-add-water' concentrated substance. Additional refill cartridges can be bought as needed, instead of buying all of the plastic every time, which A&H admits was "95% water."³

When I first saw the bottle on a television commercial, I thought they had just designed an awkward looking bottle to save plastic and thought to myself not to buy it. Though now the bottle/system makes logical sense, the marketing director who is handling the ad campaign

¹ Good Housekeeping Institute. *Consumer Needs*. August 1990.

² Coddington, Walter. *Environmental marketing : positive strategies for reaching the green consumer*. New York : McGraw-Hill, 1993. p.153

³ Sustainable Life Media. "Arm & Hammer sells cost benefit of green cleaners." October 24, 2008. www.sustainablelifemedia.com

admits that they are indeed asking the marketplace to change its behavior. And becomes somewhat of a 'commitment' on the part of the consumer. However, mixing the concentrate with water into the refillable spray bottle, is still easier than mixing your own cleaning concoction which some more knowledgeable environmentalists have started doing.⁴

While Arm & Hammer's "Essentials" has other green qualities like 'plant-based' and 'biodegradable' ingredients, its most obvious factor is the design of the bottle – which is in fact due to the new buying behavior they predict will take place. Clorox, on the other hand, is laying their green reputation on an already established environmental organization, with their announced mutual relationship with the esteemed Sierra Club. Sierra Club endorses Clorox's new line "Green Works", which debuted in the beginning of 2008, in return 5% of profits go to support Sierra Club activities. Clearly, the Sierra Club does not look at this as being 'paid' for their endorsement. Their intention is to bring the opportunity to support both environmental products and environmental consciousness to the general public. This foray was a 'risky' one for Clorox as well, which launched its first new brand in twenty years. Although Clorox consistently defends its (in)famous bleach product, it is regarded still by many as one of the more toxic products ever available on the market⁵. The executive director of the Sierra club obviously is of the mind that bleach is not that bad, and has looked at the Clorox company as a whole and found it to be "much better than an average company."⁶ While Green Works evidently has the backing of a reputable environmental group, its actual effectiveness is being challenged not only by the National Advertising Division of the Better Business Bureau, but by another challenger in the green cleaner marketplace – SC Johnson.⁷

⁴ Pennybacker, Mindy. "Rites of spring (cleaning)." Green Guide 113. March/April 2006. www.thegreenguide.com

⁵ Story, Louise. "Can Burt's Bees turn Clorox green?" The New York Times. January 6, 2008.

⁶ Pope, Carl. as quoted on PBS Newshour (with Spencer Michaels.) "Environmental demand drives eco-friendly products." originally aired: August 15, 2008.

⁷ Environmental Leader. *NAD tells Clorox to clean up ads.* August 17, 2008
www.environmentalleader.com/2008/08/17/nad-tells-clorox-to-clean-up-ads

Clorox “strongly disagrees” with the NAD’s findings but has agreed to adjust its claims that: it works as well as traditional cleaners, and the leading all-purpose cleaner. Considering Green Works does not contain any disinfectants, this indeed would be seemingly impossible. SC Johnson launched its line of eco-friendly cleaners shortly after Clorox in the beginning of 2008. SC Johnson will start with its Windex brand glass cleaner which will be accompanied by other nationally recognized brands with its ‘Greenlist’ eco-label clearly placed on the package⁸. The Greenlist is a rating system for raw materials, the company devised starting all the way back in 2001; replacing the old with improved ingredients in Pledge and Fantastik as well. Although the Greenlist label was manufactured internally, there are serious plans to license its research to other companies. Once that happens, I believe it will lend more credibility to the Greenlist certification on SCJ’s products themselves. The Greenlist does seem as thorough as any third-party certification, as it also looks at its suppliers and whether they demonstrate high environmental performance, such as ISO 14001. SC Johnson has also phased out chlorine-based external packaging worldwide and bottles made of polyvinyl chloride (PVC). Plus, they have even reformulated their Raid ant-killer to eliminate the use of the ‘O-rated’ insecticide propoxur.⁹ SC Johnson also participates in U.S. EPA’s Design for the Environment program.

With all this competition, the ‘original’ eco-cleaner company, Seventh Generation is kicking up its marketing efforts. It has been sustainable since it started over twenty years ago, so its not changing anything, except graphic design on its packaging. Although it does not have as much marketing muscle as these competitors, 7G will launch a \$1 million dollar plus ad campaign; its largest in almost five years. IRI data shows that Clorox has surpassed them in four out of the five categories in which the brands compete.¹⁰ This shows that even known environmentally-friendly companies literally need to green their image, as 7G plans to

⁸ Environmental Leader. *Windex touts eco-friendly credentials*. January 17, 2008
www.environmentalleader.com/2008/01/17/windex-touts-eco-friendly-credentials

⁹ SC Johnson website. *You name it, we’ve studied it*. retrieved November 23, 2008
www.scjohnson.com/environment/growing_11.asp

¹⁰ Wong, Elaine. “*Seventh Generation strikes back*,” *Brandweek*, 49: November 3, 2008. p.8

“brighten” the green leaf on its package as opposed to the dark forest-like backdrop they have had until now. One brand consultant says appropriately, the old version looks like it was made by someone “in a cabin in Vermont.” This may have worked when it was trying to be a niche product, but not when it’s trying to compete with the big guys, in a currently crowded marketplace. A senior analyst from Sanford Bernstein insists that Seventh Generation still holds the advantage because of its heritage. But while, the *traditional* brands try to *green* their image, the ‘*green brand*’ tries to mainstream its!

While all of these traditional companies differ in their newfound marketing attempts to sell certain green products, they still do continue to sell a number of environmentally-treacherous goods as well. For example, I purchased ‘wipes’ that were labeled as biodegradable and environmentally friendly. When I got home and started using them I noticed that the wipe itself was not biodegradable, only the cleaning agent on the wipe! Indeed, according to National Geographic’s “Green Guide,” the term ‘biodegradable’ on cleaning products is misleading even when its accurate. First of all, almost anything will biodegrade after a certain amount of time. But also, like DDT for instance, it may biodegrade into DDD and DDE, but they are still both probable carcinogens much like DDT itself.

However, the sales of even *non-green* “use-and-toss” cleaning wipes have never been higher. For all of the progress we have made ridding ourselves of extra packaging and toxic chemicals which were harming both humans and our environment, this trend of disposability in home cleaning could ‘wipe’ out all of the hard worked gains¹¹. For instance, although Arm&Hammer trucks will now be carrying refill containers instead of big bottles, garbage trucks will now be hauling 83,000 tons of wipes instead.¹² The only company that has a biodegradable wipe (besides William McDonough, who of course is “working on it”) is the green manufacturer Method. Even those however, are only billed as ‘surface cleaners,’

¹¹ Note: Pun intended.

¹² Klages, Karen. “*Wipe out: use and toss.*” Chicago Tribune. April 17, 2005

because they contain no antimicrobial agents, and therefore cannot be called disinfectants. Method, is strictly natural and built around sustainability, similar to Seventh Generation. Method's competitive advantage is its aesthetic packaging, and making cleaning not only a green experience but a pleasant one. It is believed to be "not only green but cool-looking enough to display above the kitchen counter."¹³

So which one of these five different philosophies of how to make a successful green product will succeed? Arm&Hammer's Essentials with its *innovative package design and refill system*? Clorox's GreenWorks and its *auspicious association with a reputable environmentalist organization*? SC Johnson's Greenlist product line – espousing *intricate research into all of its ingredients*? Seventh Generation's *reputation* (and more visible graphic design)? Or Method, with its quality image and *aesthetic sensibility*? Or perhaps, ex-Hollywood *celebrity*, current green-*celebrity* Ed Begley Jr. and his product line of Begley's Best 100% plant based cleaners? As much work and analysis that clearly went into all of these products, only the market will tell...

¹³ Sustainable Life Media. "Method's Eric Ryan on Designing a Sustainable Brand." retrieved: November 24, 2008. www.sustainablelifemedia.com/people/innovators/brands/methods_eric_ryan_on_designing_a_sustainable_brand

APPENDIX

<u>PRODUCT</u>	<u>Credentials</u>
Arm&Hammer ESSENTIALS	60-80% less packaging. Save 25% with buying only refills. 'plant-based w/ other ingredients that are 'biodegradable'
Clorox GREENWORKS	Endorsed by Sierra Club. Bought 'Burt's Bees' "99% Natural." Recyclable (#1)
SC Johnson GREENLIST	Awards. Design for the Environment. Licenses its 'ingredient list' to other companies. Working on and improving since 2001. Recyclable (#1)
SEVENTH GENERATION	Reputation. Recycable (#2)
METHOD	Aesthetics. 100% recycled plastic, and recyclable (#1)
BEGLEY'S BEST	Celebrity. Really natural, really biodegradable (3-7 days).