

Cutting through the clutter

By David F. Morrill
April 19, 2010

On the first day of his Principles of Marketing class, Michael Luchs takes his students to the bright lights of Times Square -- not literally, but through video. Once there, he asks what they see. The most common answer: a lot of nothing.

Which proves Luchs' point. "We are assaulted with information these days, and it's more difficult than ever to break through the clutter," he says. "How do you engage potential customers when they have become largely immune to becoming engaged?"

Luchs' answer is "Product," one of the four "Ps" of marketing (the others being Place, Promotion, and Price). "How do we define a product?" he asks. "How do we identify customer needs and requirements? How do we develop a product that will address those needs, and then promote it, if you actually have a good product to promote?"

These days, success has a lot to do with products being green, and Luchs has been busy researching ethical consumerism, another term for sustainability. He seeks to understand why so many people say sustainable products are important, but don't necessarily buy them.



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As an example, he cites recycled car tires. "Because they're made of recyclables, people fall for the stereotype that they're not as strong or tough or durable," Luchs explains. "To combat this perception, companies need to promote that their products aren't just good for the environment, but that they work well, which is important to consumer perception."

Luchs calls this "beating the ethical penalty," which a company like Clorox has done with its Green Works line of products. Unlike many companies that think printing "sustainable" on a label is enough, Green Works benefits from the reputation of the Clorox name itself. "The Clorox brand definitely means strength of product," Luchs says. "It's the best of both worlds."

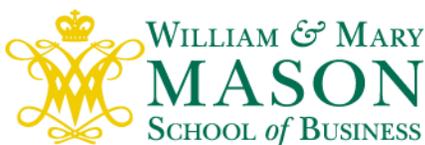
Before joining William and Mary, Luchs himself enjoyed the best of the corporate and academic worlds. He spent six years as a principal of a consulting firm and six as a senior vice president of marketing and as a product manager before earning his doctorate at the University of Texas at Austin.

One of his current specialties is the study of how form and function impact sales. "Design is thinking beyond aesthetic and form," he says. "The consumer buys the whole experience, the sufficient functionality and aesthetic that communicates the elegance of the underlying technology -- like the Prius and the iPod over other brands. When you buy these, you're saying something about yourself as well as enjoying a well-designed product."

Luchs himself is enjoying his work at the Mason School and appreciates the fresh perspectives students bring to his marketing research and to the classroom. "I like feeling that what I do is valuable and valued by others," he says "My previous career was enjoyable, but I'm much happier doing what I'm doing now."

Working in a business school with an excellent brand and strength of product might have something to do with that.

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