

But Does It Work?

In 1960, Harvard business professor Theodore Levitt introduced the concept of “marketing myopia” in a now-famous article in the *Harvard Business Review*. In it, he characterized the common pitfall of some companies that focus just on the features of a new product instead of how it can actually meet customers’ needs.

When it comes to Green marketing, we find many of our customers do want to switch to environmentally responsible products, but they also want those products to perform. Some distributors are not finding as much success selling Green products as they expected because they may be focusing too much on the products’ “Greenness” over the broader expectations of the customer. We must always remember that the customer selects new products, whether they are cleaning products, telephones, or copiers, based on whether the products offer serious benefits that they desire or will help them at their jobs.

For example, in the mid-1990s, Whirlpool introduced a refrigerator that was 30 percent more energy efficient than any other model on the market and was also chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) free, using no Freon for cooling. After winning scores of awards from utility companies and environmental groups, and after receiving the U.S. Department of Energy’s highest rating for energy efficiency, the company thought the model would sell well.

Unfortunately, sales languished because the CFC-free benefit and energy savings did not offset the higher price consumers had to pay for the refrigerator. Whirlpool’s marketing focused solely on the model’s Green benefits. Consumers liked that, but they found that the refrigerator did not offer any additional benefits common on models in that price range. In fact, most found the refrigerator to be “very basic.”

General Motors and Ford had a similar experience when they introduced electric cars in the late 1990s. After spending hundreds of millions of dollars on the models, both manufacturers believed the cars would be a success, especially in energy-conscious states such as California. However, fewer than 800 were ever sold or leased, although the companies spent heavily on marketing.

Consumers were intrigued by the electric vehicles and looked forward to not paying for gasoline, but the cars just did not perform as well as conventional cars. Additionally, consumers soon realized that they would have to drastically change their driving habits to accommodate the need for electricity to operate the cars. Here again, pushing Green over consumer needs led to failure.

For distributors marketing Green cleaning products, these experiences teach us a valuable lesson. Instead of selling how Green a product is, focus on how well it performs and how it can help reduce cleaning costs and improve worker productivity. Ultimately, the consumer wants the product to work first and then be Green. When your customers are convinced of the “non-Green” benefits of environmentally preferable cleaning products, they will be more inclined to select them.