

The Role of Consumer Associations in Promoting Sustainable Consumption

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Consumers Union of U.S.

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- Independent, nonprofit testing and publishing organization
- Unbiased product ratings and service evaluations for cars, appliances, electronics, etc.
- 6 million subscribers to *Consumer Reports* magazine and *ConsumerReports.org* web site
- Part of Consumers International, a global network of 250 organizations from 110 countries

Information to promote informed consumer choice

- U.S. consumption patterns are unsustainable
- Markets fail to “internalize the externalities”
- Changes in public and business policy are needed
- Individual actions can also make a big difference

Challenge #1: Too much information about too many problems

- Consumers/citizens can easily be overwhelmed
- “1,000 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth”
- Overuse of “overconsumption” can induce paralysis

Solution: Targeted information about priority problems

- Analyze biggest environmental problems
- Determine where individual consumer action can make the biggest impact

The Most Harmful Consumer Activities

- Cars & light trucks
- Meat & poultry
- Fruit, vegetable & grains
- Home heating, hot water & air conditioning
- Household appliances & lighting
- Home construction
- Household water & sewage

Source: Union of Concerned Scientists

Challenge #2: Misleading Information

- Proliferation of environmental labels and claims
- Some information is contradictory and misleading
- Example: “pesticide-free” label which allowed higher residues than current government standards

Solution: Serve as a watchdog for accurate information

- Consumers Union created the Ecolabels.org web site in April 2001
- Developed set of criteria to measure environmental labels
- Includes label standards, sponsoring organization, evaluation & report card for every record
- Includes labels for organic food, sustainable agriculture & fishing, animal welfare, etc.

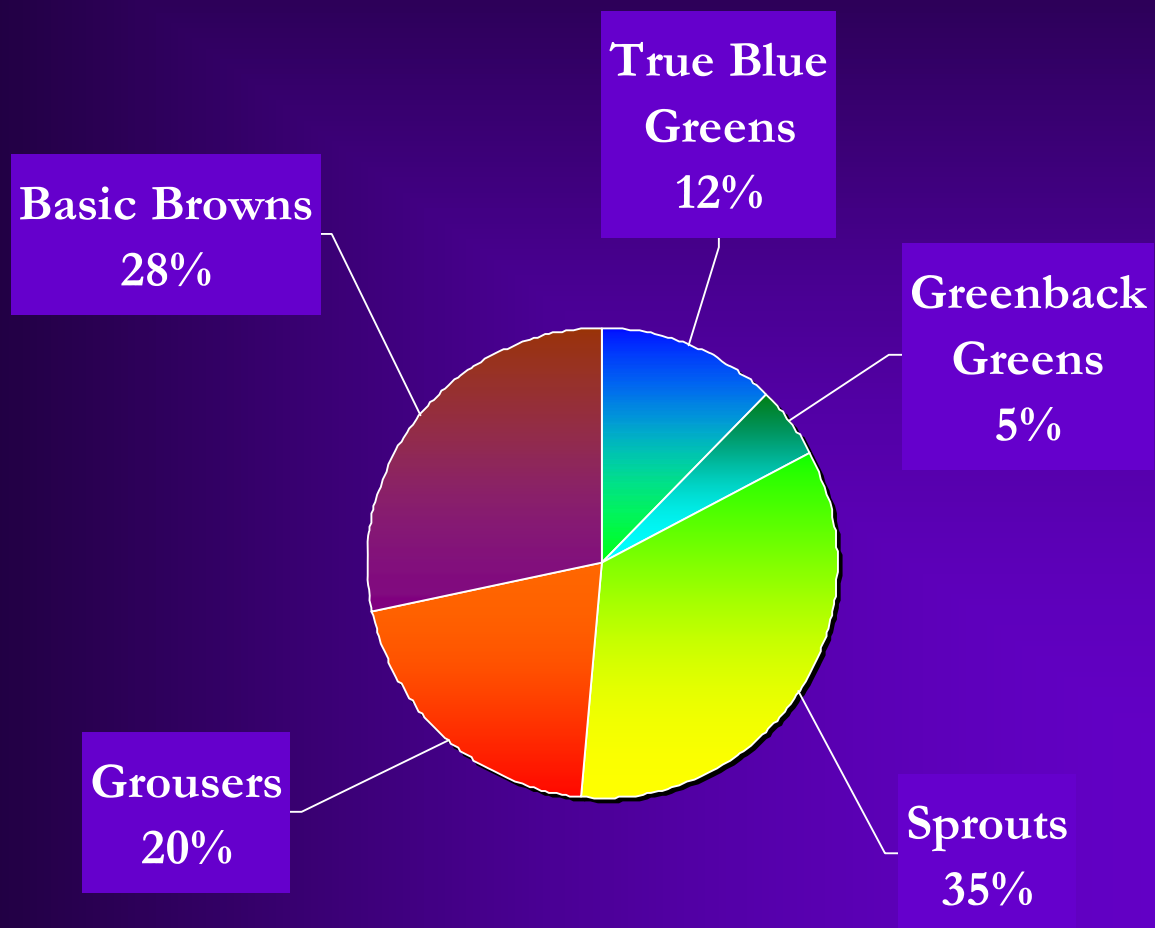
Measuring the Credibility of Environmental Labels

1. How meaningful is the label?
2. Does the organization verify that label standards are met?
3. Is the meaning of the label consistent?
4. Are the label standards publicly available?

Measuring the Credibility of Environmental Labels

5. Is information about the organization publicly available?
6. Is the organization behind the label free from conflict of interest?
7. Was the label developed with broad public and industry input?

Challenge #3: Engaging More Consumers



Market Segments from Roper Green Gauge Report (2000)

Primary reasons consumers are concerned

- Protect Human Health (56%)
- Protect Resources for Future Generations (48%)
- Ensure Existence of Natural Places / Wildlife (31%)
- Preserve Recreation Areas / National Parks (20%)
- Protect Resources for the Economy (18%)

Source: Roper Public Pulse (2000)

Barriers to Change

- I'm Too Busy to Make Changes (53%)
- Environmental Products are Too Expensive (52%)
- Large Companies Should Take Action (51%)
- Not Sure Green Products are Actually Better (48%)
- Green Products Don't Work as Well (44%)
- Others Aren't Sacrificing, Why Should I? (40%)
- My Family Won't Accept Green Products (30%)

Source: Roper Public Pulse (2000)

Solution #1: Make it easy to take action

Consumers need choices that are:

- Identifiable
- Accessible
- Affordable
- Practical
- Attractive

Solution #2: Provide reliable information to facilitate effective choices

- Consumer Reports is creating a searchable “Products for a Small Planet” section of its web site, with sections on cars, appliances, electronics, home & garden and other topics
- Incorporate environmental criteria into product and service evaluations
- We will relate environmental choices to consumer concerns, and explain why they are meaningful

Solution #3: Highlight non-environmental benefits of green choices

Examples:

- Durable products last longer
- Energy-efficient products save money
- Household cleaning products without toxic chemicals are safer, and better for health
- Sustainable travel can lead to more satisfying personal interactions and interesting cultural experiences

Solution #4: Encourage greater civic engagement

- Consumers have responsibilities as well as rights
- Codes of ethical practice can apply to consumers as well as companies
- Consumers should use their voice as citizens to support environmental protection and sustainability
- Where appropriate, we plan to engage our members in environmental advocacy work

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