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Colorblind: How Consumers See Green

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Green Design

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Colorblind: How Consumers See Green

by Mark Bates and Grant Kristofek

With the myriad criteria inevitably part of any project, it is not always easy to bring sustainability to the top of the design agenda. Mark Bates and Grant Kristofek share what they have done to lift its profile with their clients. This effort in conjunction with an ongoing research project at their firm suggests that there are significant opportunities to make sustainability a valued factor in consumer decisions.



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Spending on all things green is on the rise. This, we know. And companies are answering the call, working overtime to offer products and services to satisfy the growing demand. But why? Why are people finally abandoning their plastic grocery bag habit? Why are eco-friendly light bulbs selling in record numbers? And why do SUV sales continue to plummet?

One would assume these shifts are the result of clear, conscious decision-making. But are they? The reality is that little is known about why people are changing habits. To create great products and services, designers must work through the emotional and physical lens of the people they serve. If we as designers have limited knowledge of how consumers think and feel about the environment and the choices they make in relation to it, then for whom are we designing these new offerings? Aren't we



People view the environment as abstract—it's somewhere they occasionally "go out into," not the place where they live.

missing the most important voice in this important conversation? Who are we designing for?

At Continuum, we asked ourselves these questions and didn't arrive at any satisfying answers. So we decided to find out.

Colorblind was born.

The title *Colorblind* is a play on the notion that not everyone "sees" green the same way.

Through this study, we hoped to uncover how people think and feel about the environment. We wanted to know what consumers are doing (if anything) for the environment and why; where people are getting their information; and what influences their way of thinking. Ultimately, we want to find out what motivates consumers to choose green.

Like every project, we started this one by studying people. We selected the cities of Fort Collins, Colorado; Atlanta, Georgia; and Boston, Massachusetts—each singular in geography, climate, and culture. We also chose 20 unique households of individuals, couples, and families. Our participants were diverse in a number of ways. They varied in age, educational background, political view, and lifestyle, while their level of awareness about the environment was just as varied as their interest in it.

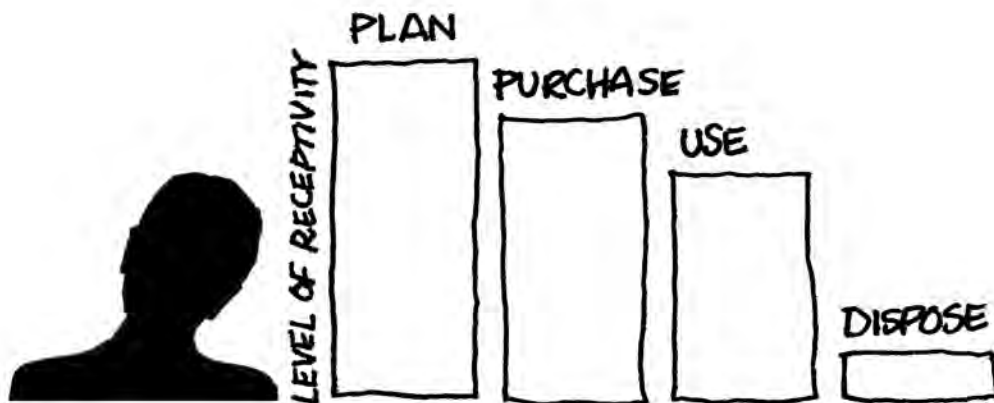
All participants shared a firm foothold in the American middle class. They also shared an openness to dialogue and an active reevaluation

of their day-to-day choices, brought on by recent transitions in their lives. One married couple had become new parents, one family had just moved into a new home, and a group of teenage friends were preparing to head off to college. All were in transitional phases, looking at their lives and decisions through fresh eyes, and helping us to gain insights into their personal views and environmental practices. Looking at people while in transitional phases was key; these are times in one's life when decisions and behaviors are reevaluated.

We engaged in conversations with them in the intimacy of their kitchens and living rooms. We accompanied them as they went shopping, uncovering their views about products and companies, values and priorities, choices and trade-offs. We were invited to look into kitchen cabinets and recycling bins, to measure what they told us against what we saw, to uncover how decisions are made—when to recycle, whether to buy a hybrid car, how to set the thermostat.

What we discovered opened our eyes and paved the way for possibility.

- People care about people; the environment only matters when it directly affects them. People care more that a natural pesticide, free of toxins, is safe for their family than safe for the environment. We need to tell them the whole story.



People are more receptive to learning about environmental issues and offerings at the plan stage and less receptive to environmental communication at the dispose stage. (Rather than search for recycling possibilities for an old chair or toothbrush, people are more likely to simply discard it out of hand.) This should be kept in mind when crafting communications to consumers.

Sustainability: The 360° View

Editors at DMI recently spoke with Mark Bates and Grant Kristofek.

DMI: How did you and Continuum become involved in the sustainability effort?

Mark Bates: Sustainability started as a grassroots movement. An invitation from *Core 77*, the online industrial design magazine, to submit a sustainability concept for a competition entitled Light Objects, in early 2006, had many of my colleagues intrigued. Along with many multidisciplinary practitioners, we entered the competition. The varied projects represented at the competition provoked an open conversation within our organization on a wide range of green issues. As a result of this engagement, a green team emerged that steadily grew into a movement. The company's leadership became involved in the process and decided to formalize it by creating two championship roles.

Since then, our sustainability effort has evolved into a multi-tiered approach. We recognize that to be successful we need to change the way we do business and the way we go about consulting our clients. And we also realize that this requires constant learning and we are committed to it.

DMI: Where are you in your sustainability effort right now?

Bates: Initially, we brought in well-known environmentalists and sustainability experts. Ultimately, we decided to have in-house champions to disseminate this ongoing learning and to infuse sustainability into the organization. The overarching goal is to develop broad capabilities and leadership in this field.

My colleague, Grant Kristofek, and I serve as sustainability champions. Grant brings an in-depth understanding of green issues and the science behind them, as well as the emerging solutions. My perspective as an industrial designer is to contribute contextual design experience and know-how for integrating sustainable thinking both in our consulting practice and in our operations. As part of this effort, we are developing key relationships with our counterparts in the industry and we are reaching across industries to widen our knowledge and to develop viable solutions.

DMI: How have you worked with your counterparts in the industry? What has that process been like?

Bates: Most notably, we supported the Designers Accord, initiated by fellow designer, Valerie Casey, last year.

Grant Kristofek: The accord represents a community of designers that have come together to accelerate the sustainability effort within our industry. The large number of participants—now counting 100,000 members in 100 countries—has created momentum to raise the profile of sustainability and make it an integral part of the design conversation. This is causing a measurable mind shift in how designers engage with clients and customers.

The accord may still be in its infancy, but it is a great baseline for our industry.

Bates: Designers aren't the end-all of global sustainability. However, we are in a position to have a significant influence. We affect consumption and impact. We design products that are multiplied by the millions during manufacturing, and then get shipped around the world for consumption. We realize that we are in an influential space and that we have global reach. So, for us, sustainability is not just a nice-to-have.

Obviously, there is a competitive advantage to creating sustainable frameworks and solutions and being the first to do it. However, we need to break with the competitive model and share our knowledge with fellow designers. This is too important an issue to go it alone, and we have a limited time to address it.

DMI: What have you learned through the process of championing sustainability?

Kristofek: Fundamentally, a sustainable approach makes sense. The three vitally important ingredients in our approach are education, collaboration, and process.

We are continually connecting and working with experts to educate ourselves and others on best practices. To this end, we have both hosted and actively participated in green events and summits.

We believe in the spirit of collaboration and are committed to sharing our knowledge, both internally and externally, and testing our evolving perspective.

We are constantly looking to improve our process of integrating what we learn into our practice in a meaningful and measurable way. For this to happen, it is vitally important to create accountabilities as a way to ensure that things happen.

DMI: What challenges have you faced, and how are you responding to them?

Bates: As I mentioned, we have approached sustainability on an operational and practice level. On the operational end, it is easier to see immediate results. We took it upon ourselves to become educated on how to measure our carbon footprint, and we are constantly looking for new ways to reduce it. In our practice, we are raising awareness with customized sustainability training for both employees and clients. But our view is that you can't just read a book or take a class. We need to integrate sustainable thinking into our daily process.

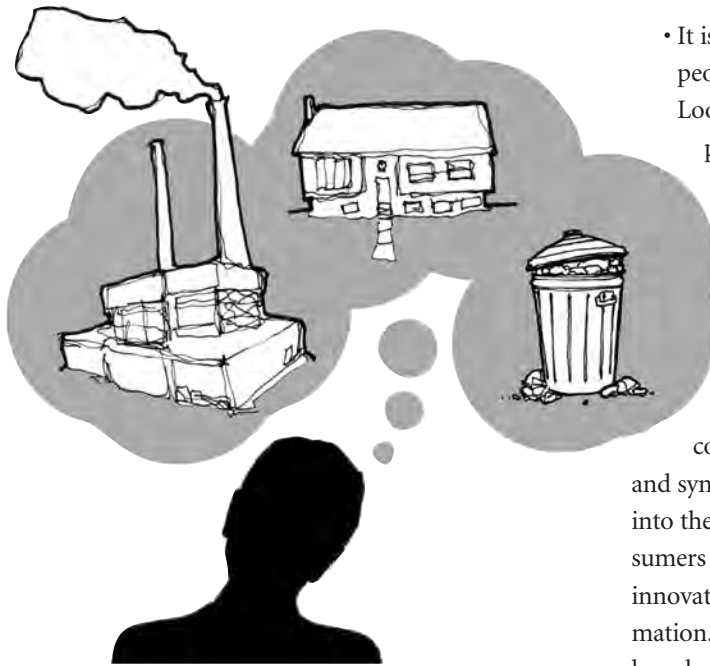
The real challenges lie in our consultancy practice. We are in the business of innovation, yet we follow a fairly well established design process. When we start designing a new product, we typically think about the competitive landscape, marketability, ergonomics, safety, design, engineering, and cost. Until recently, sustainability has not been a major consideration. And we are working to change this.

Kristofek: We are founded on a user-centric approach. We find out what people want and deliver it to them. We are evaluating our process and what we've learned from the sustainability training and overlaying it into the green lenses that we apply to each project. And timing is critical. We aim to start at the alignment phase of each project in order to highlight opportunities and areas of focus early in the process. The benefit of going through this exercise is getting people to look at projects through the sustainability lens.

DMI: How do you sway your clients to choose more sustainable solutions?

Bates: As part of the Designers Accord, we have pledged to raise the topic of sustainability with all our clients. And we have also promised to share knowledge among designers as we break away from the competitive advantage model and grow our capability in this area.

Kristofek: We are taking a proactive approach. We are not waiting for clients to come to us. We anticipated their need by developing our own research project to find out what consumers want. As designers, we need to empathize with the end users, so we launched Colorblind to understand how people think and feel about the environment. ■



"Where does it come from; how do I use it; where does it go?"

- We learned that people view the environment as abstract; as the place they occasionally "go out into," not the place where they live. To engage people more with the environment, a stronger connection needs to be made to their everyday lives.
- People's ideals were often inconsistent with the reality of their actions. Many beliefs they held about how to treat the planet were not carried out at home. Often it was the obvious, visible activities, such as recycling, that did receive their attention.
- Being green and buying green don't go hand in hand. Those with lower income levels live more sustainably not necessarily for the benefit of the environment but simply because they consume less. Although living sustainably or being "environmental" is perceived as expensive, what we witnessed was quite the opposite.

- It is not one or the other. We discovered that people's green-ness is multi-dimensional. Looking at people along a scale is too simplistic. The reality is that a consumer's relationship to green is based on varied personal motivations and characteristics and spans many personas. Understanding this will help us speak to people in more relevant ways.

This is only the beginning. The study continues. We are looking at more findings and synthesizing data every day, digging deep into the motivations and realities around consumers and green. Effective design strategy and innovation in the future depends on this information. Because of this, we're using what we have learned so far to inform our clients and our design process.

The next phase of research is being pored over and the results are helping us to create a picture of how to inform our work. We are looking at the specific motivations for consumers in the green movement. We will be sharing our complete findings and exposing the opportunities for organizations and designers in the coming weeks.

Visit us at www.dcontinuum.com/colorblind and talk to us at colorblind@dcontinuum.com. We'll keep you updated. ■

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