

Can Green Business Survive the Red Tape?

by Jason Louv

With the world entering a recession, how will the green movement fare? Is green, in fact, essential to how business must be done in this century, or is it just another luxury?

With oil headed to \$125 a barrel, an upgrade to green energy would seem *de rigueur*. This is the core issue of green—a replacement for the oil economy and everything that comes with it. The green movement is about finding new solutions for old problems—new forms of energy, transportation, housing and the rest of the infrastructure which makes 21st century life possible, but done more cleanly. Green technology is an upgrade—a way to do life better and (in many cases) more cost-effectively, in a way that doesn't wreck the scenery. It's a question of new technological solutions to the problems caused by old technology.

Then there's the window dressing—the fashionable edge of green, even greenwashing; ways for individuals and companies to show that if they're not necessarily part of the solution, at least they're not part of the problem. The green hairshirts worn by the "ecorazzi" probably have less to do with saving the world than they do with assuaging first-world guilt—a smiley-face mask for corporate greed. Yet while rich celebrities spearhead the fashionability of the green movement, Middle America is left in the lurch by exorbitantly priced enviro-friendly food, clothing, cars and other green luxuries. Getting by from month to month is enough of a struggle for most, let alone stressing over one's carbon footprint. In many ways, worrying about the world beyond your own immediate needs and those of your family is a luxury that comes with surplus wealth and leisure time.

Yet, ironically, the poorest people in the world are also the most "green," as they leave behind the least waste and recycle as a matter of sheer necessity. If we truly are in for a global recession, and the first world begins to move closer to the "necessity" end of the spectrum instead of the "luxury" end, we may have a lot to learn from the global poor's approach to sustainability.

The question is, will sustainability practices and services become essential by becoming imperative to the conservation of resources—or will they vanish into the woodwork? Or, more succinctly, is "green" a serious issue or a distraction?

The world faces looming problems—global warming and, more pressingly, a recession and potential shortages of food, water and energy. Will the green movement help us out of these binds by proposing and enacting solutions, or will it be forgotten as people struggle to scrape food and resources together?

The huge amounts of money that have been sunk into green by companies like GE, Coca-Cola and Wal-Mart—even in the face of recession—provide for a strong green-collar sector, and suggest that it is in the interest of large corporate powers to keep green on the map at least in the short term. (67% of Awakening Consumers think we'll be hearing even more about green than we do now in the space of the next ten years.)

"Things could turn sour of course," reports the Environmental News Network. "For now the green sector looks solid, but if the credit crunch gets much worse, funding may dry up for all kinds of projects including new renewable facilities. Perhaps more damaging, capital needed to create, build and expand new businesses in the green sector may also disappear leaving good ideas, new technologies high and dry."

There's another way to look at things, of course. In times of recession—or even depression—ways to conserve money and resources are of paramount importance, and this is where green solutions may come into their own. A solar-powered house which pumps energy back into the grid and provides for a \$400 electric company check for its occupants every month may seem like a fashion accessory now, but may be a survival edge within a few years.

As futurist Jamais Cascio tells us later in this issue, "One under-appreciated benefit of a recession is that, because of the reduced manufacturing and work travel, carbon emissions tend to decline."

As has often been remarked, environmentalism isn't about saving the planet—the planet has been through countless ecological cataclysms and upheavals and has survived, life intact. It's about saving us—and, like it or not, that may not be possible in our civilization's current hyper-energy-suck form. In a tug-of-war between us and the planet, where we strip the planet of resources past its breaking point, we lose, not the planet. As our environment changes—global warming, Peak Oil, the breakdown of overextended first-world infrastructure—we have to change to meet it. A Prius or a TerraPass is only a token gesture—the real mandate is to evolve or die.

So, will green business evolve past its current form as a clearinghouse of token good-citizen awards, and actually start meeting the challenges of this century head-on? If it provides or assists in the delivery of useful goods or solutions to our most critical infrastructure problems—if it meets people's needs, especially their needs in times of hardship—then it bears a good chance of not only surviving, but thriving during times of recession. If it's a frivolity, an image or a way to greenwash a lifestyle, we probably won't see it beyond another year, as the public sobers up via the short sharp shocks provided by the realities of economic downturn.

And what about the Awakening Consumer? It's easy to go straight back to sleep when you have a \$10 shopping budget and are faced with the choice of regular canned chili for \$0.59 and organic canned chili for \$2.99. If buying in the Awake Space is essentially a privileged activity, what happens when that privilege is threatened? (In the event of a recession, 64% of Awakening Consumers stated that they would still pay extra for organic food, 19% wouldn't, and 17% plan to grow their own food!)

As we look to the future of the green movement in this issue of g-Think, however, we're looking past the simple bumps on the road to the long term future. The problems to which the green movement has arisen as a response to are not going away; neither will the response. As we race against the real deadlines—Peak Oil, global warming—little things like recessions shouldn't slow us down. They should only show us where to shift our strategies, assist us to hone our tactics and goals, and provide the challenge needed to keep this game fun.

It's a whole new century, and this is just the beginning. Ready?