



Trimming the Trees

By Aaron Dalton

What catalogers are doing to preserve the planet

Sustainability often presents a quandary for outdoor outfitter Patagonia.

On one hand, the company has dedicated itself fully to preserving the planet, its environmental and conservation goals defining everything from its mission statement to its product line.

But there's another type of sustainability that Patagonia officials have to bear in mind — that of their own business.

So when executives at the company talk about the environmental impact on forests of their successful catalog program, they do so knowing full well that, as much as big businesses may want to help the planet, they sometimes can't help doing as much harm as good.

“We need to be profitable or we will not be sustainable, and the catalog is a successful sales driver for the company,” says Angela Weidmann, Patagonia's catalog print production manager. “We cannot walk away from producing a catalog, so we strive to lessen the impact by committing to several things.”

And Patagonia is not alone in its efforts. From clothing companies to home furnishing manufacturers, retailers are taking a variety of steps to minimize the environmental impact of their catalog operations — for the sake of the planet and also to retain the loyalty of the growing ranks of green consumers.

Take, for instance, outdoor apparel and equipment maker, as practicing sustainable forestry. Despite the slight cost increase, L.L. Bean has also begun stepping up the use of recycled content in its catalogs.

The company also claims to maintain one of the cleanest mailing lists in the industry, which makes economic and environmental sense. Sending catalogs to people who don't want or need them wastes paper, production and mailing costs.

“Customers have an expectation of companies like ours. We sell outdoor goods and apparel so people can enjoy the outdoors, therefore we feel we have responsibility to maintain and protect the outdoors,” says L.L. Bean spokeswoman Carolyn Beem. “We think our customers are more attuned to issues surrounding paper, catalog production and environmental standards. While there is more than one way to green a business and achieve environmental best practices, most companies should assume that their customers will be paying attention.”



Many of the other big-name catalog retailers have taken steps to mitigate the environmental impact of their catalog operations in recent years. Limited Brands, the parent company of Victoria's Secret, no longer accepts paper sourced from endangered forests of Canada's Boreal Region. The company has also dedicated \$1 million to research and advocacy for the protection of endangered forests.

Williams-Sonoma Inc., which produces seven different catalogs for major home products brands including Pottery Barn and west elm, announced in November 2006 that it would immediately start sourcing nearly all its paper from FSC-certified sources. FSC-accredited certifiers conduct full audits every five years, as well as supplementary annual audits, to make sure that forests are being logged legally in a way that preserves the rights of indigenous peoples, conserves biological diversity and protects the ecosystem.

Meanwhile, Patagonia — whose mission statement says that the company should “make the best product, do no unnecessary harm [and] use business to inspire and implement solutions to the environmental crisis” — is leading the way in its own industry with some inspiring initiatives. These commitments include decisions to use lighter weight paper, continually clean and maintain mailing lists and print catalog body copy on 40-percent post-consumer waste recycled paper that has been FSC-certified. “Of all forest certification systems, the Forest Stewardship Council provides the clearest assurance of protection of endangered forests. The FSC further assures protection of imperiled wildlife, First Nations and indigenous peoples' rights, and other crucial environmental and social values,” says Weidmann.

With all the challenges and costs of producing and mailing a certified, post-consumer, recycled and generally eco-friendly catalog, why not just scrap the catalog altogether and rely completely on Internet marketing and Web site sales? Patagonia does use its Web site to tell stories that are too long to relate in the limited space a catalog provides. The Internet also gives Patagonia the ability to offer customers video clips, audio or a photo slide show of its products in action.

But Patagonia still sees its catalogs as an essential part of its multi-channel marketing strategy. “The catalog and Internet go hand-in-hand,” says Weidmann. “When a catalog drops in the mail, Internet sales go up, and we also see increased sales in our retail stores. The catalog sparks an interest in the company while giving the customer a choice of getting on the phone, going online or visiting a retail store...Customers who shop in multiple channels are our most loyal, valuable customers, so we strive to give them a rich multi-channel experience.”

Above all, companies that successfully reduce the environmental impact of their catalogs must have willpower, commitment and ingenuity. The most eco-friendly solution may not always be the cheapest solution. Patagonia's calculators don't just measure monetary costs and benefits; they also measure greenhouse gas emissions, water pollution, water usage, solid waste generated, etc.

Despite its substantial accomplishments in reducing its environmental footprint, Weidmann still keeps looking for ways to get even greener. She doesn't see much of an opportunity to reduce page counts or mailing frequency while still achieving sales goals, but she believes that Patagonia might be able to reduce or eliminate its order form insert. “Some of the information on the order form is vital, but I think we can find a way to save both paper and money on inserts,” she says.

Saving paper and money — now that's the kind of green solution that even an accountant would love.