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When it's time to jump on a marketing bandwagon

As soon as I hear about a new marketing or advertising trend, I tend to think it's too late to get on board without looking like an imitator rather than an innovator.

However, I've found that originality can be overrated. If you pay attention — even if you're not first — and if the trend is right for your industry, you're likely to be ahead of many of your competitors. That said, I still believe most trends aren't worth the cost of getting on board. They're over before you can get any real benefit from them. And you may end up looking like a me-too candidate rather than a front-runner.

A few soul-searching questions can help you sort out the smart ideas from the ones that just suck your time, with little to show for it.

- Is this issue part of your core business? Is it something you can expect your customers to be asking you about? If it is, you must explore it at least far enough to know why you should or shouldn't be involved.

- Is this issue something you — or your customers — would prefer to avoid? You may be better off facing it head-on. Think of the jump that Toyota got on the car industry by developing the hybrid engine. Think of how BP has painted itself as ecologically correct. They both have a huge advantage over competitors now by taking the path that others feared.

Can you make money with it? If not, where else might it make an impact? Can it help you attract new customers? Is there PR value in getting involved?

Is the issue in line with your company's values? Your customers may not be asking you about it right now, but the people behind the cash registers or in your IT department may think it's a big idea. If your employees are excited about a particular

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trend, you're already halfway there. The energy will be there.

Several months ago, our company was involved in a large bidding opportunity. One of the sections in the RFP (request for proposal) asked about our efforts in corporate social responsibility. We had ready answers for many of the questions, but when they

asked about our environmental philosophy as a business, frankly we were caught flat-footed.

After all, direct mail is a big part of what we do — and, of course, item No. 1 on many people's lists of "things to do to save the planet" is to get off junk mail lists. To be honest, we'd been avoiding the issue. Hiding seemed like the better part of valor.

This uncomfortable moment made us realize we hadn't been thinking about the whole green mindset the right way at all. As marketers, we were aware that consumers were looking for more environmentally friendly products. We even have two nonprofit clients involved in sustainable agricultural and economic development. But we weren't thinking about the planet when it came to our own actions.

The shock of being unprepared for that RFP got us moving. How late to the party were we?

Over the next several weeks, we did some research and found we weren't really late at all. Few marketers have done any deep thinking about their own carbon footprint. We knew it wouldn't be long before our clients would start asking for

our help in making some positive changes.

So we explored ways to make what we do as marketers a little less impactful for a change — at least as far as having less negative impact on the environment. We worked with our vendors and several people internally to come up with a list of positive actions we can take with our clients.

We invested time, certainly. And we also began putting some money into it. For example, we now promise our clients that printing their marketing materials on recycled paper using 10 percent post-consumer waste won't cost any more than what they'd pay for virgin stock. This kind of investment on our part is important. It shows this isn't an exercise for show — a "green-washing" technique that could backfire.

If you decide to jump on a trend, it's critical to think through all the ramifications. The time, effort and financial costs involved could be more than you want to pay. Worse, if you have to jump back off because the price ends up being too high, it could reflect badly on you — in ways you could have avoided by not getting involved in the first place.

Ultimately we were happy about the wake-up call that RFP gave us. We discovered the piece of the environmental issue that was part of our core marketing business. We already knew a pro-environmental stance could help us attract new customers, since it was a prospective client that brought the idea to us. And as a socially responsible business, we knew it was already part of our values. We won't be avoiding the issue any longer.

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