

Conversations around Green Products

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ABSTRACT

This article is based on candid conversations around the perceptions of Indian consumers about green products. Contributors of this piece were approached for an e-mail-based interview on their experience of having used green products. The interview questions revolved around the attributes, usage, weaknesses and benefits of the green products. Besides, their opinion was solicited on the factors that inhibited or augmented the propagation of green products. The contributors also shared their views on the role of the corporate, the government and the community in promoting green products in India. Contributors of this piece, mentioned in alphabetical order, come from varied background and they aptly reflect divergent thinking. Only nominal changes have been made in the interview transcripts to maintain the essence of the opinion of the contributors. As there are few researches on the Indian consumers' perception about green products, this article is likely to ignite a wider public discourse. Considering the significance of green products in ensuring sustainability, it is imperative that

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such issues take centre stage in public debate at all levels. No conclusions have been drawn purposefully so that the readers can develop their own perspective and plan their action to patronize and promote green products to foster sustainability. The conversations around green products featured in this article have been meticulously curated by Dr Srirang K Jha, who is deeply interested in the issues revolving around ethics, corporate strategy and public policy.

KEYWORDS: Green Products, Green Consumerism, Sustainability, India

Please share your experience of using green products? In case you have not used any green product, what could be the possible reasons?

Barun S, Mitra (BSM): We rarely buy a product just because it is claimed to be "green", but because it's preferred functionalities. The most common green product I have used is the khadi fabric, which typically uses organic dyes. Or the more energy efficient refrigerators and air-conditioning or automobiles.

Charudutt Panigrahi (CP): Have used cooking stove (without emission) in the low-income communities in India.

S. Veeramani (SV): Yes, I have decent experience of using green products since from the day one in which I learnt to save environment. Hail from village area I used to mostly use green products for many years till I moved to city. The cotton bags or bags made of jute used for shopping and all, and mostly the plastics bags/ carry bags were not encouraged by the villagers due to social and culture bound idea of using one single cotton or jute bag for maximum period. And I have hardly used any plastics materials or related products because there was no necessity and nothing called demand for plastics and related materials especially for the day-to-day activities.

Umesh Rishi (UR): Depends on industry to industry and case to case basis, if I give example of FMCG Packaging, have used a lot of green products like Recycled PET for Jars & Bottles, Corrugated Boxes made up of recycled raw materials i.e., Testliner etc.

V. Selvarajan (VS): From tooth paste to dinner, I use many green products. They are very well available.

In your opinion, what are the attributes of green products?

BSM: Efficiency in manufacturing, and lower environmental footprint. And better functionality, and convenience.

CP: Environment compliant, low emission, using renewable energy

SV: That which doesn't harm environment, or minimal in ecological damage, that which leaves minimal carbon footprints. That which doesn't or least add to global warming.

UR: Environmentally friendly.

VS: Bio-degradable materials are in my opinion is need of the hour which have less impact / cause to produce pollution. Over all eco – friendly as the eco system is important for survival. And the industry people must follow sustainable model while producing. And finally sensitive towards environment is essential part of life because there is nothing called life without clean environment.

In your view, what are the benefits of green products?

BSM: Fundamentally, green products are just a different label for a new generation product, since most new products that enter the market are more efficient, less energy/water/resource intensive. Typically, they have greater features and advantages over the earlier generation products in the same category.

CP: Contributes to the life of the planet.

SV: Cost effective, maintenance effective too, basic support system such as water, air saved. And as health is wealth – which starts from the environmental health only because human can't imagine a life without clean environment. Business firms must be sensitive on this matter.

UR: For environment – its environmentally friendly. For company – it contributes to their environmental initiatives.

VS: Reduces depletion of natural resources, Controls harm to health and environment, minimizes carbon footprints, delays global warming.

What, according to you, are the weaknesses of the green products?

BSM: Because of the exotic green label, the prices of certain products are marked substantially higher than the conventional products. Organic food is a good example, where despite claims to lower cost of production, the market price is typically 50-100% more than the conventional ones. Consequently, the organic food segment has not been able to grow beyond its small niche in most countries.

CP: Technology is still nascent.

SV: Lack of confidence among the consumers about green products, The supply side are weak in delivering the right green products, there are some handling issues as suddenly using words such as green products may confuse the minds of consumers. And green has become more marketeering word and the real sense of green products and usage yet to arrive.

UR: High cost, for instance, using recyclable PET for Jars increases reduces your margins, as going green entails a high cost here. You may think why high cost when its recycled raw materials i.e., rPET, but the fact is that in India we do not have this technology & consistent grade of raw materials for finished good production.

VS: (Lack of) availability, economies of scale, acceptance, and awareness.

In your opinion, what are the factors that discourage people from buying or using green products?

BSM: High price, less variety and limited access. Along with confusion over labels.

CP: High price. Also, consumers do not see much utility in the green products.

SV: Some of the issues with green products are short deliveries besides being perishable in nature. Green products are generally not user friendly, and they lack quick business processing. Also, there is lack of confidence among consumers when it comes to green products. I believe, green products can't completely replace the conventional materials. The standard set for green products is still not up to the mark.

UR: Cost, accessibility, service levels.

VS: Lack of awareness, callousness, lack of farsightedness. The Government doesn't play a pivotal role. This situation is changing but the process is a bit slow. Generally eco-friendly products, organic edibles and chemical free materials are not available in abundance.

What, according to you, can motivates people to buy and use green products?

BSM: Green products need to break out of the high value, low volume niche market mindset, and aspire to become mass market products. Cost and convenience can be game changer for promoting green products in the country.

CP: Good price point, product features and good after sales service can certainly motivate people to go for green products in India. People must see value in the green product so that they can consistently patronize them.

SV: Importance of eco systems, showing the importance of environment for human survival, clean air and water possible only when we shift to green products. Government agencies by activism can motivate people to adopt green products. Business concerns can widely reach out to the consumers to tell them about significance and utility of green products. And civil society must take a leadership role in motivating people to adopt the green products.

UR: Govt regulations, subsidies, innovation, affordable pricing and availability may motivate people to buy and use green products.

VS: Users are the best advertisers. Eco-friendly lifestyle can be replicated by more individuals, if social organisations and government emphasize the impact through 3 'C's namely ACTION, AWARENESS and ADVOCACY, people will be drawn towards the green products.

In your opinion, what value people may seek in green products before buying or using?

BSM: Utility and cost-effectiveness.

CP: Price, product quality and utility.

SV: Eco-friendliness for human survival.

UR: Depends on product to product and country to country, in India we do not pay more for going green product, while in EU people will usually pay more as they think of their social responsibility.

VS: People generally prioritize the impact on health, affordability and environmental concern.

In your view, what should the manufacturers do to promote green products?

BSM: Manufacturers could desist from stressing and stretching the novelty and greenness of their product, and instead focus on how the green products are a part of continuous effort at product improvement. Rather than the high margins of profit and low volume

characteristic of a niche market, manufacturers need to think of reaching out to the mass market, with high volume and low profit margin.

CP: Innovation, invest in R&D and affordable pricing.

SV: Widely reach consumers and society at par with reach of the conventional products. Collaborate with government and NGOs to promote eco-consciousness.

UR: Market well

VS: Producers look at the economies of scales. If cost of production is high, price will be higher. It's therefore difficult to expect producer to promote green products. Again, upgradation of technology may add to costs. At the maximum, branding products as eco-friendly may help. But the corporate leaders must address these issues and try out solutions rather than getting bogged down by constraints.

In your opinion, what should the government do to promote green products?

BSM: Government should not be in the business of promoting green products or any other product. The government should rather focus on ensuring an open and competitive market.

CP: Provide more subsidies.

SV: **The government must ensure** strict compliance with environmental protection laws and international treaties and protocols. Besides, the government also needs to sensitize society and consumers by wider campaign on environmental protection.

UR: Subsidies are the only way out at the moment considering the unaffordable prices of most of the green products.

VS: Government can make green certification mandatory. Tax breaks may help. Also, the government should incentivize organic farming. Above all, subsidies on green products can be an absolute game changer in Indian markets.

What, according to you, should the communities do to promote green products?

BSM: Communities need to adopt cleaner, greener and efficient living, by reducing their own ecological footprint. For instance, by sorting, recycling and reusing whatever is possible. For instance, many households in Dwarka are generating organic fertilisers from their kitchen waste.

CP: More usage of such products and value dissemination.

SV: Community must actively join hand with state and business concerns in getting the green products promoted, reach wider people and end users. Communities can make the consumers really king by making the environment as their divine guardian. Environment is mother we are only safe on its lap.

UR: More awareness will lead to higher adoption of green products

VS: I think I as an environmental activist am already encouraging people to switch over to green products. It's a social cause. The change is happening but slowly. I will reiterate the 3 'C's namely ACTION, AWARENESS and ADVOCACY.