

Message in a Bottle: Corporate Sustainability Is Pretty Weak Tea

By Anya Kamenetz

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I think I'm the only person who moderated panels last week at both the Clinton Global Initiative in New York City and Opportunity Green, a green business conference in Los Angeles. While it may seem unfair to compare a gathering of the biggest machers in politics, philanthropy, finance, and the corporate world, to a scrappy little powwow of design startups and vegan caterers, there were some undeniable commonalities (like the attendance of folks from NBC and Coca-Cola). People in general, as they are at every conference, were far more interested in shmoozing and snagging as much free stuff as possible, getting onto the Wi-Fi and grabbing a power outlet, than they were in the sessions themselves. And more gravely, the ideas on the stage about how to make the world a better place, and in particular how to make big business more sustainable, were pretty played out.



Heaven bless Jeff Swartz. Whether onstage or in a private interview the Timberland CEO tells it like it is. On a CGI panel with Walmart senior VP of sustainability Matt Kistler, and The Nature Conservancy's lead scientist, M. Sanjayan, he burst out with, "The private sector is not the answer, because there is no answer. The absence of leadership is the crisis --the government needs to do their job and set regulations ... I'm getting old and tired of winning battles. I'm afraid of losing the war."

That was on Tuesday. On Thursday I was sitting onstage--at a literal studio, the L.A. Center Studios--with Gopal Krishna, marketing VP from Coca-Cola, and three green entrepreneurs whose business models were perfect examples of winning battles with design. Worthy of special notice, Jason Foster has designed Replenish as a cradle-to-cradle cleaning company, with special spray bottles where you clip on refills of concentrate to the bottom; the stuff inside has all sorts of fantastic organic properties as well. But it's still chemical cleaner in a plastic bottle that may or may not be recyclable or recycled in your local area.

Gopal Krishnan, a marketing VP from Coca-Cola, showed a little video to showcase their new PlantBottle (actually announced last May). "Up to" 30% of each bottle is made from PET derived from sugarcane byproducts. The animated video announced that the company is working toward "a goal" (no timeline) of "100% recyclable" bottles, although Krishnan made it clear in the panel that what that actually meant was 100% recycled bottles.

But it's not, strictly speaking, true that Coca-Cola promotes 100% recycled bottles. While I was working on my story for the November issue of this magazine, Conrad MacKerron of the corporate social responsibility organization **As You Sow** told me that Coke, Pepsi, and other beverage companies spend lots of time and money fighting the mandatory deposit and takeback laws that are the single most effective measures determining whether containers actually get recycled. As a result, recycling rates in the United States have actually declined since the 1990s, from over 50% to less than 40%, while in the 11 states with deposits the rates average over 80%.

What Coca-Cola is really after was also captured in the video.

"PlantBottle is an innovative plastic *bottle you can feel good about*." [Emphasis added.]

Changing laws is no easy matter. Also at the conference I spoke to a young woman from the Surfrider Foundation who is fresh off a grueling fight to get plastic bags banned across California, a fight foiled thanks to an industry payday for key state senators. But fighting as citizens is what we're going to have to do if we want to change how business is done.

[Image: Flickr user *mjmonty*]