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More firms market to 'green' consumers

From Reuters

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McDonald's Corp. is blogging on the environment, Starbucks Corp. has designed a green-themed online game and Hilton aims to link manager pay to making its hotels greener.

While all of them say they have been working for years or even decades on pro-environment strategies, these corporate behemoths acknowledge that U.S. consumers' growing awareness of global warming is changing the way they work.

But they operate with caution because no one wants to be accused of "greenwashing" — or what Mark Spellun, founder of eco-lifestyle magazine Plenty, calls "putting a green halo over themselves when it is completely undeserved."

Weather disasters like Hurricane Katrina, the Oscar-winning documentary "An Inconvenient Truth" and President Bush's push for fuel alternatives to oil have heightened concern about climate change in the last year.

Experts warn that a failure to address that shift in opinion could hurt the bottom lines of companies selling to consumers.

More than 60% of U.S. consumers hold government and big business directly accountable for global warming, according to a recent study by market research firm MindClick Group.

"Business needs to be aware of this and much more proactive in getting out in front ... because it will very quickly impact consumers' decisions when they are reaching for their pocketbooks," MindClick Chief Executive JoAnna Abrams said.

Using less energy, producing less waste, recycling and teaching customers to reduce heat-trapping carbon emissions are some of the ways companies show they care about the planet.

"Because people are becoming more educated and aware, we are always going to be responsive," said Bob Langert, vice president for corporate social responsibility at McDonald's.

McDonald's took steps 15 years ago to reduce its packaging and more recently began keeping environmental scorecards for its vast stable of suppliers.

The world's largest restaurant company is now working on informing consumers of its green strategy, exploring digital routes via podcasts and blogs on its website, Langert said.

The world's top coffee shop chain, Starbucks, has also chosen a digital platform to interact with customers on the environment. On April 3, it will launch the Planet Green Game at planetgreengame.com.

"We decided to take a shot at a serious game as a way to really engage younger people who are spending time online ... connecting them with tangible things they can do in real life," said Ben Packard, Starbucks' director of environmental affairs.

Environmental activists note companies are more committed to fighting global warming than the U.S. government. While Bush wants to reduce dependence on oil, he does not want to adopt mandatory greenhouse gas emission cuts under the Kyoto treaty for fear they would hurt the economy.

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