



## Managing green marketing: Hong Kong hotel managers' perspective

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### ABSTRACT

In view of the serious environmental problems we are currently facing, taking action to protect our planet is becoming more persuasive and important. Along with various environmental initiatives, the concept of green marketing emerged in the late 1980s. Some hotels have taken various initiatives to position themselves as green hotels, including the use of eco-labels as a marketing ploy to attract customers. Nevertheless, some of the hotels that use these green marketing strategies have been accused of “green washing”. The main aim of this study is to investigate Hong Kong hotel manager perceptions of the relative importance of different green marketing strategies. Questionnaires containing 30 attributes were distributed to this effect. The findings reveal that hotel managers equally perceive “Hotel green marketing should begin with green product and service design”, “Hotels provide products and services that do no harm to human health” and “The Internet is an effective channel to market a hotel's green initiatives to customers directly” as the top green marketing ploys. Independent *t*-tests and one-way ANOVA were also used to examine significant differences in the way hotel managers with different professional backgrounds and individual demographic characteristics rate the importance of hotel-related green marketing strategies. The findings indicate that lower-grade hotels tend to adopt lean green marketing strategies, whereas hotels with larger sizes or formal environmental management systems are likely to adopt shaded or extreme green marketing strategies. The study also provides a number of insights to help hotel managers and especially marketers better understand the implementation and importance of different green marketing strategies, thereby allowing them to employ suitable measures to avoid the “green washing” designation and attract more green-conscious travellers.

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### 1. Introduction

Many hotels have responded to environmental problems such as global warming, the depletion of the stratospheric ozone layer and over-consumption of non-renewable resources by implementing environmental programmes or adopting environmental management systems (EMSs), either for the sake of the environment, for economic reasons or to build a positive image (Chan, 2008). Some hotels use the label “green hotel” as a marketing ploy to attract customers (Pizam, 2009), as it is believed to play a critical role in customers' decision-making processes and behavioural intentions (Prendergast and Man, 2002). However, many companies have become cautious about launching environmentally conscious promotions for fear of being accused of “green washing” (Peattie and Crane, 2005). Thus, it is not clear how hotel managers evaluate hotels' green marketing strategies.

There is a wealth of studies on environmental management practices, the driving forces of these practices and other

environment-related systems, customer perceptions of environmental practices and so forth, but few studies have examined hotel managers' perceptions of green marketing strategies. The design and alteration of a hotel's business model, including green marketing strategies, are affected by the external influence of the hotel's customers. Notwithstanding, internal influences such as hotel manager attitudes towards company strategies cannot be neglected, as the decisions made by top managers significantly affect company performance despite the required assistance of their subordinates.

Few studies examine managers' considerations of important hotel components. In addition, studies that investigate hotel green strategies based on manager points of view are also limited. There is no empirical evidence on how hotel managers evaluate a hotel's green marketing strategy. Therefore, the main aim of this study is to investigate hotel manager perceptions of green marketing strategies to provide hoteliers with essential insights into facilitating the development of such strategies. To support this aim, the study addresses the following research objectives:

1. to examine what hotel managers consider important green marketing strategies and

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2. to suggest possible green marketing strategies to hotel marketers.

## 2. Literature review

The concept of “green marketing” emerged in the late 1980s (Peattie and Crane, 2005). The term describes an organisation’s efforts at designing, promoting, pricing and distributing products that will not harm the environment (Pride and Ferrell, 1993). Welford (2000) defines it as the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying the requirements of customers and society in a profitable and sustainable way.

Different companies have taken different approaches to green marketing activities. McDaniel and Rylander (1993) classify the activities according to two main approaches: the defensive approach and the assertive approach. Companies that adopt the defensive green marketing approach do only the minimum to avoid negative consequences, i.e., penalties for not meeting local government environmental regulations. Rather than simply meeting government regulations, companies that adopt the assertive approach are more aggressive in green marketing, responding to market trends and surpassing stakeholder requirements. In examining the strategies used in green marketing, previous studies tend to adopt certain categories to create an analytic framework. For instance, Mathur and Mathur (2000) used four categories of green marketing—green products, recycling, green promotions and the appointment of environmental-policy managers—to analyse the wealth effects of green marketing strategies. Ginsberg and Bloom (2004) used the primary marketing-mix tools of product, price, place and promotion to divide green marketing into four main strategies: (1) the lean green strategy, (2) the defensive green strategy, (3) the shaded green strategy and (4) the extreme green strategy. According to scholars, companies that adopt the lean green strategy do not do much to promote their green initiatives and try only to reduce costs by implementing environmental programmes. Companies that use the defensive green strategy do so as a precautionary measure to respond to external pressures from competitors and environmental groups. When the shaded green strategy is used, companies normally focus on long-term benefits and view green activities as opportunities to create innovative products and technologies. A well-developed system is also used to achieve the desired outcomes. Finally, companies that use the extreme green strategy fully incorporate environmental issues and responsibility into their business strategies and address issues such as pricing, quality and manufacturing for the environment.

In the past, companies have implemented various green marketing strategies to meet the demands of environmentally conscious customers. For instance, some companies have designed green products in view of market demand, or have developed products that save energy and resources during the production process (Porter, 1991). Some companies have created advertisements that reflect their commitment to environmental protection (Kangun et al., 1991). Marketers also set higher prices for their green products to balance consumers’ sensitivity to cost against their eagerness to pay more for the product (Lampe and Gazda, 1995). Other companies have found ways to reduce pollutants and save resources during the transportation of products to market (Bohlen et al., 1993).

In the hotel industry, as mentioned previously, many hoteliers use the label “green hotel” as a marketing ploy to attract customers (Pizam, 2009). Manaktola and Jauhari (2007) stated that marketing a hotel’s environmentally friendly practices can increase its competitiveness by helping to position it differently in the

competitive arena. As people become more willing to pay more for environmentally friendly products (Kapelianis and Strachan, 1996; Laroche et al., 2001) although few hotel customers would agree to pay more to purchase green hotel products and services such as staying in a “green” room (Millar and Baloglu, 2011), a green image is also believed to play a critical role in customers’ decisions and intentions to purchase (Prendergast and Man, 2002; Lee et al., 2010; Han et al., 2011) in addition to other desired hotel attributes such as security, dependability, service quality, reputation, staff behaviour, price, the appearance of facilities, and location (Lewis, 1985; Knutson, 1988; Ananth et al., 1992; Banerjee and McKeage, 1994; Chan and Wong, 2006a) in which a convenient hotel location and overall service are the most determinate factors (Rivers et al., 1991). Despite this, many companies have become cautious about launching environmentally based communication campaigns to promote their green products for fear of being accused of “green washing” (Peattie and Crane, 2005). It is also unclear how hotel managers evaluate different green marketing strategies.

Academic studies on green marketing began appearing in the 1990s, and the majority have focused on concepts and approaches (Polonsky, 1994; Peattie, 2001; Peattie and Crane, 2005; Rex and Baumann, 2007), the evaluation of green marketing strategies (Polonsky and Rosenberger, 2001; Rivera-Camino, 2007), green marketing’s relationship with customers (Laroche et al., 2001; Ginsberg and Bloom, 2004; D’Souza et al., 2006; Lee, 2008) and its application (Johri and Sahasakmontri, 1998; Teisl et al., 2002; Gurau and Ranchhod, 2005). Some studies have also tried to determine the motives and reasons behind green marketing. For instance, Shearer (1990) indicates that a main driving force behind the implementation of green marketing is that some organisations perceive it as an opportunity to achieve their objectives. Other driving forces include a company’s moral obligation (McIntosh, 1990), pressure from government bodies and competitors (Delmas and Toffel, 2008), the potential to improve revenues (Bansal and Roth, 2000; Kuo and Dick, 2010), the opportunity to save on costs (Kuo and Dick, 2010) and the opportunity to build a positive image (Saha and Darnton, 2005). Despite the reasons for adopting a green marketing strategy, certain barriers including the perplexity of environmental information and its low credibility have been found to influence the effectiveness of green marketing (Moisander, 2007). This implies that hotel manager perceptions of green marketing strategies play an important role in the success of hotel campaigns. Prothero (1990) also advocated that the marketing concept and subsequent strategies need to be rethought when examining the effect of green consumerism trends on the role of marketing departments. Therefore, it is essential to investigate the relationship between green marketing and hotel managers.

Some academic studies have investigated the relationship between green marketing and managers. Based on a sample of 115 firms that responded to a survey sent to 1200 companies in Spain, Rivera-Camino (2007) analyses how environmental managers prioritise stakeholders and the influence of the organisational context on environmental manager perceptions of the stakeholders. Throughout his several-phase study, he identifies the stakeholders associated with GSM and their effect on firm-adopted strategies, and establishes how the effect is moderated by firms’ economic sectors and organisational characteristics. Gurau and Ranchhod (2005) examined international green marketing strategies by comparing Romanian and British eco-firms. Using firm-manager interviews, they find that Romanian firms usually export ecological products through foreign agents, whereas British firms sell internationally using their own brand names and attempt to control foreign distribution channels. Pujari et al. (2003) surveyed the person responsible for environmental issues within new product developments for 1000 UK manufacturers and establish a

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