



# Innovation and Sustainability - A Powerful Combination to Unlock Value



*This article appeared in the December 2012 issue of El Empaque magazine.*

I recently attended the PDMA'S Product Innovation Management Conference and found the language of product innovation similar to what you hear at many sustainability conferences. The design processes that underlie much of product development and innovation are likewise similar to those that inform sustainable design. There was a presentation from a P&G executive who provided several case studies of unlocking innovation by applying Design Thinking. She emphasized the flexibility of the framework by highlighting the range of problems it can be applied to - organizational processes, product development, as well as team building. The part of Design Thinking that caught my attention was the idea of framing a problem from multiple perspectives. She noted that you gain insights you didn't think of and as a result you find opportunities to respond and deliver value in ways you hadn't thought of.

In my mind the end game of sustainable design is to drive an expanded definition of value. Too often sustainability is narrowly defined by the perspective of environment and then dismissed within business for not being able to deliver on productivity and consumer expectations. Likewise, within companies' value can be narrowly defined as delivering performance at the least cost. Value so constrained is limiting its possibilities. It should include a broader range of perspectives including exceptional consumer experience and environmental responsibility designed into the product and packaging.

According to a 2012 Natural Marketing Institute Global Study of Consumer Sustainability Attitudes and Behaviors, packaging can be one of the most highly leveraged opportunities for companies to communicate to consumers about their social and environmental activities. In one country as many as 54% of consumers surveyed said packaging was their preferred media. However, it seems that outside "sustainable brands" few mainstream brands leverage this opportunity well. A recent success story that seems to have unleveraged this possibility is Kraft's new MiO (Italian for "mine") flavored water concentrate. It is a highly successful category breakthrough product for Kraft. Interestingly, it was developed through an employee innovation day. A lot of attention was paid to the design of its teardrop squeezable package. It is pocket-sized and designed to be secure and reclosable so it won't leak in a purse or pocket. The product and package have some obvious sustainability characteristics. The product is not shipping water like many flavored waters. It is designed to be durable. Could its useful life be extended through recycling, being refilled, or even reused? Picture the MiO Nextlife travel shampoo. Could it be tied to a MiO cause that appeals to the

segment who buys it? Not all possibilities would fit, but without getting the perspectives one never knows if the opportunity to provide value is there.

How we embed and build sustainability into our products and packaging can start by thinking about sustainability issues at the beginning of the product development process, a key tenant of sustainable design. But taking lessons from Design Thinking and gaining insights from multiple perspectives create an approach to provide value to consumers and create opportunities that we haven't thought of – this is innovation.

Many companies struggle with embedding sustainability in their thinking, their processes, as well as their products and packaging. The implementation of sustainability within businesses could benefit from the strategies and methods deployed in innovation. In business, innovation is a powerful tool for seeking and creating value. If we can use the same processes and find new ways for businesses to find value in sustainability, that would be a powerful way to help drive the change we need in the world for future generations. As businesses that create packaged goods, we should embrace this challenge. It is an opportunity and also our responsibility.

Johnson, Anne. "Innovation and Sustainability - A Powerful Combination to Unlock Value." *El Empaque* Dec. 2012: 66. Print.

*Anne Johnson is a Principal and Vice President at Resource Recycling Systems. She is an expert at applying life cycle thinking to materials management and enhancing products and process design. Anne has served as a strategic advisor for numerous companies, government panels and trade groups and is the former director of the Sustainable Packaging Coalition. Contact Anne at [ajohnson@recycle.com](mailto:ajohnson@recycle.com).*