



**FIGURE 1: Examples of certified brands**

# How can a third-party certifier help you build a stronger brand?

We are seeing labels such as Fairtrade and the Marine Stewardship Council badged on more and more of the UK's biggest consumer products. But do marketers use these labels to help build stronger brands? **Liz Tinlin** uses new research to identify best practice that calls for marketers to get more actively involved

**S**USTAINABILITY IS a huge, complex agenda that few of us in business understand in any depth. But to the aid of businesses has come a wide array of NGOs, each promising to help 'clean up' our act in one area or another, tackling issues as diverse as workers' pay, fisheries, forestry, energy use or even the nation's bees.

These 'third-party certifiers' each offer a solution to one of these many challenges, and in return for meeting their defined standards, we get to demonstrate their 'badge' on our brands in the hope that consumers will use it as a way to buy more responsibly and, in the process, feel more trust in our brand.

In return, the success of these third-party

labels depends on brands communicating them to their consumers, raising awareness of the issue and promoting solutions. More and more brands are choosing a third-party certifier and flagging their endorsement – Figure 1 shows just a small selection of what's on offer in the UK high street.

Sustainability experts will tell you this plays a key role in shifting our economy to being more sustainable, and that of course it is of benefit to brand equity. Yet responsibility for building brand equity primarily rests with marketers, not sustainability experts, and has many facets, including brand positioning, product performance, service delivery, reputation building and communication.

So how involved are brand marketers in making these third-party decisions? Do they believe these endorsements can play a role in building a stronger brand? Ground-breaking new research by GreenBabel, in conjunction with the Marketing Society and the University of Surrey, has finally established a marketers' viewpoint about third-party certifiers.

More than 100 senior marketers took part, some in face-to-face interviews and the rest via an online survey. The brands they could speak for ranged from retailers such as B&Q, J Sainsbury, Homebase and Upper Crust, to consumer products such as Birds Eye, Unilever, Pepsico, Mars, Innocent,



Allied Bakeries, SABMiller and Kimberly Clark. Cumulatively, the study represents around 2000 man-years of marketing experience. Distilling all of that has made it possible to identify the real issues and, most importantly, develop a guide to best practice.

But before we get to best practice, several key insights illuminate the issues we face.

**1. Marketers are unimpressed by labels' branding:**

Marketers fundamentally behave like consumers – they recognise these labels (see Figure 2), but they don't mean much to them and they certainly struggle to name which brands the different labels are used on. When they do pay attention, their view is influenced by marketers' extra layer of brand savvy – many respondents said these labels look like 'the kind of thing you'd see on a builder's van', with poorly designed logos.

This is driven by the fact that these organisations are third sector, often without big budgets or the calibre of brand marketing and agency expertise that big consumer brands can draw on. This creates a culture clash that can feel like putting a caravan on the back of a Porsche.

The only label that has made it out of this mire is Fairtrade, which has a brand-ness all of its own, with clear associations, imagery and both emotional and functional levels to its equity. Marketers viewed it as the top of the pile, and had respect for its depth, its use of PR and its clear purpose – it felt like a campaigning, action-orientated agent of change, not a 'rubber stamper'.

**2. Most marketers don't feel they can own the problem:**

Sustainability is a complex area and is often 'owned' outside the marketing team. It's not a natural thing for a marketer to really understand the difficulties of getting a more sustainable supply chain for fish, for instance. But as a result, marketers are often reactive, not proactive, putting the badge on the pack as if it were nutritional labelling – something they have to do but that only relates to the product, not the brand (as if the two were unrelated).

**3. Marketers find it difficult to work with secondary purchase drivers:**

For most marketers, just knowing the top one or two buttons to push with consumers is hard enough: how do we talk about low fat? Should we do seasonal flavours? Can we increase grease removal power? Whatever the primary function of your product is, it will be the key door-opener to your consumers, and that is where marketers focus the bulk of their communication and innovation efforts. While we all know there is a lot more to a brand than just the primary product function, working out the contribution of secondary purchase drivers keeps many research agencies scratching their heads.

As a result, some marketers will claim that sustainability 'isn't a key driver' and therefore isn't worth spending time on. In most cases it's because they think of it in isolation, not linked with the brand positioning, and therefore it becomes too difficult to manage.

But in terms of considering use of a third party at all, you need to be clear on what your brand stands for in order to work out how this third party could contribute. It should reinforce the brand positioning – supporting particular benefits, demonstrating your brand values and enhancing the brand story in a specific way. Senior marketers point out that this is an exciting chance to get into positioning thinking in a way that is rare in multinational organisations nowadays.

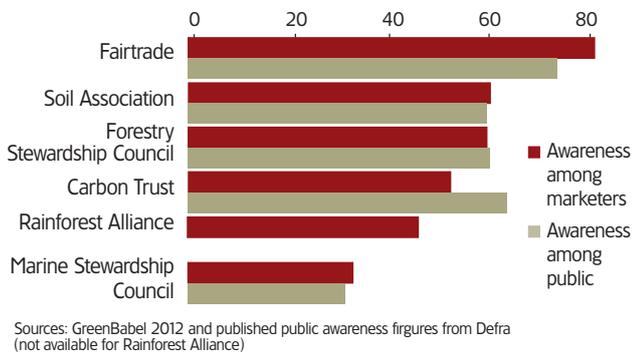
**4. Marketers need to clarify what their brand stands for:**

Many senior marketers had stories to tell about the difficulties of getting their teams to really understand and articulate what their brand stands for in the minds of its consumers, and what they want it to stand for – in terms of its mission, DNA, character, beliefs or simply key benefit. They believe that lack of clarity on the brand 'core' can drive poor decision-making, ineffective agency partnerships and lack of prioritisation.

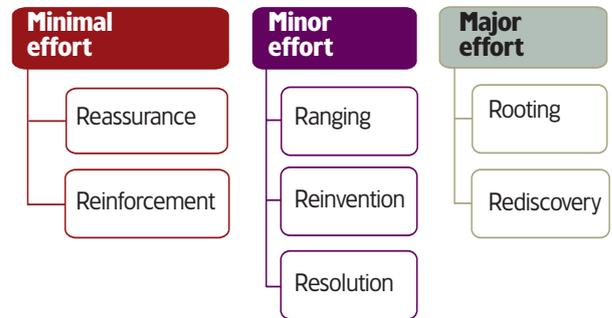
If the brand manager isn't clear what the brand stands for, communication strands will be pulling in different directions, regardless of how creatively or effectively any particular tool is used.

And when it comes to third parties, if the brand team doesn't know what the brand should stand for, how does it know whether this third party should stand alongside the brand?

**FIGURE 2: Awareness of major UK third-party labels (%)**



**FIGURE 3: The seven 'Rs' of label roles**



**5. Marketers use third parties in different ways:**

The study identified different roles that a third party could play for a brand, which we have been able to group into the Seven 'Rs' of label use (see Figure 3). These range from those requiring minimal effort from the marketing team (*Reassurance* or *Reinforcement* labelling for legislation or trading conditions), to those that are minor or major marketing effort initiatives.

Minor effort roles include *Ranging* (extra SKU, such as one Fairtrade coffee variant), *Reinvention* (supporting NPD claims), and *Resolution* of a category issue, such as fish stocks (MSC) or paper pulp supply (FSC). In *Resolution* cases, these tend to be robust but often undifferentiated points for the brand. With *Ranging* and *Reinvention* there is the risk of controversy and accusations of greenwashing if it's not about changing the whole business, but just utilising a market opportunity for a niche audience.

By contrast, for major effort roles, the third-party thinking is closely integrated with the brand positioning. The third party's aims and values are either closely *Rooted* to the brand's historical DNA, or help to *Revitalise* the brand and demonstrate a new purpose. For example, for Ben & Jerry's, it was logical to get Fairtrade certification as it matched the embedded values *Rooted* in the brand. But for McDonald's, getting fish from MSC sources, using FSC packaging, and serving Rainforest Alliance coffee all act as evidence of the brand's *Revitalisation* aims, giving it more credibility as being 'good food, fast'.

**6. Success takes marketing effort**

Marketers who have been more successful at working with a third party to their brand's benefit tend to have three things in common:

- They make an effort to understand the story and the science behind the label, evaluating it as they would a sports sponsorship or any other brand property.

- They are crystal clear what their brand stands for, and this tends to mean not just a within-category positioning, but also a bigger meaning or purpose that brings with it values and beliefs that drive how the brand behaves.

- They focus on major effort roles, looking to reinforce the *Root* of the brand, or *Revitalise* the brand for growth. This means marketers should play a valuable role in evaluating whether a third party is the right one for their brand, getting in earlier in the conversations, and making time to discuss with the sustainability, R&D or supply chain people which of the possible partnerships could be of the most mutual benefit.

This leads us neatly to a best practice template, which can be summarised in a simple ABC guide:

**A is for attention**

Give your full attention, make it a debate, and work out for yourself whether this third party is the right issue, the right solution and has the right credibility to help you build your brand.

**B is for brand-centric**

Be clear what your brand stands for – what are its values, beliefs and character? How does the third party compare? Does it align with your beliefs, or are there some conflicts that pose risks or could undermine what you're trying to build?

**C is for collaboration**

Be prepared to work as closely with the labelling organisation as you would with any other partner. They are the experts in their area and they are keen to work with you, but they are not experts in marketing or the commercial realities you face. Create a team that includes your agencies and play with the possibilities – out of this may come a creative leap that drastically changes the brand-building potential of the certification.

**D is for direction**

Plot the course you want for your brand and be clear how this fits into that narrative – will there be an 'episode two', and does it lead you anywhere interesting for future communications or innovation? Can it help you build credibility in new markets and open doors for your brand?

**E is for engage**

To make it worth the effort, you need to inspire and delight consumers with this news and build a clear association in their minds between the issue, the label and your brand. It's an exciting activation brief, with questions you wouldn't normally face working alone. For example, does the label NGO have grass-roots organisations that can give you unique consumer influence? Can you work with other brands using the same third party to build a bigger, better idea?

**CONCLUSION**

Third-party labels are one consumer-facing thrust of the sustainability 'movement', and one that depends largely for its impact on consumer brands badging and promoting the label to consumers.

But this study reveals that marketers can and should play a far more active role in selecting the right third parties to make partnerships with their brands, taking ownership of the issue and solution as they would any other brand property. And with that comes a responsibility to evaluate, learn and provide feedback – even influencing the labelling organisations themselves. In this relationship, brand marketers have a great deal to add and a lot to gain.

*Liz Tinlin is a strategy consultant and founder/MD of GreenBabel Ltd  
liztinlin@greenbabel.co.uk*

*This is an edited extract from a fuller research debrief, available to participating organisations now and to be released as a report in April 2013*