

BY JEFF BORDEN//FREELANCE WRITER

SUNCHIPS LETS THE SUN IN

HOW FRITO-LAY EMBRACED GREEN AND GROUNDED ITS BRAND IDENTITY



WHO: SunChips is a multigrain snack launched in 1991 by Plano, Texas-based Frito-Lay North America, a unit of Purchase, N.Y.-based PepsiCo Inc. Frito-Lay employs more than 48,000 and generates annual sales in the \$11 billion range. SunChips come in four flavors—original, harvest cheddar, garden salsa and French onion—and contain 30% less fat than potato chips. The brand is marketed as a healthier snack alternative with each serving containing 18 grams of whole grain, roughly the same amount in a slice of whole wheat bread, and no trans fats or cholesterol.

WHAT: With growing numbers of consumers interested in sustainability and the eco-conscious efforts of the companies they purchase from, SunChips wants to emphasize its position as a “green” snack.

The company is using solar energy at its plant in Modesto, Calif., one of eight where the products are produced. The 10.5-ounce bags SunChips currently uses are manufactured using 33% renewable, plant-based materials, but in 2010 the company will unveil a bag that decomposes in about 14 weeks when placed in an active compost bin or pile. Additionally, SunChips is teaming up with the National Geographic Society on the Green Effect project, which invites consumers to suggest how they would use one of five \$20,000 grants to make their homes, offices, schools or communities more eco-friendly. Also, SunChips donated \$1 million toward the reconstruction of Greensburg, Kan., which was leveled by a tornado May 4, 2007. The town is being rebuilt as the “greenest town in North America” and will include a solar-powered SunChips Business Incubator.

HOW: SunChips had the market for healthier mass-produced snacks largely to itself for many years, says Gannon Jones, vice president of portfolio marketing at Frito-Lay, adding, “This was a brand before its time.”

Three years ago, Frito-Lay executives saw that advantage ebbing away as more companies began aiming at the same health-conscious snackers. Meanwhile, discussions about green earth initiatives, sustainability and other eco-conscious topics were increasing geometrically, driven in part by the 2006 release of *An Inconvenient Truth*, a documentary exploring the dangers of global warming. The company commissioned several studies including in-home ethnographies of its customers to better understand what was behind the erosion of its market share and also to brainstorm ways the brand might tighten its bond with consumers.

“We discovered an intersection between consumers concerned about their own health and also concerned about their planet,” Jones says. “It was really just about listening to our consumers and marrying that with an emerging trend we saw that was getting bigger. We saw a great fit for this brand.”

All Frito-Lay brands have been exploring ways to save water, energy and fuel, but those efforts have been driven by efforts to control manufacturing costs. Gannon describes the SunChips brand as “the beacon, the lighthouse of what we are doing.”

When Frito-Lay executives raised the possibility of installing solar energy panels on the SunChips plant in Modesto last year, the brand embraced the idea and set it in motion.

“SunChips powered by the sun? Wow. It’s a natural fit,” Jones explains. “We started to put the sustainability story together at that time.”

Early in the process, SunChips began working with Toronto-based agency Juniper Park. The goal was to weave the idea of sustainable energy and earth-friendly initiatives into the snack food’s DNA and make it part of the brand’s ongoing strategy. This would not be short-lived greenwashing of the product.

“We realized we had really good news to tell,” says Barry Quinn, Juniper Park’s executive creative director. “We were not trying to do advertising to lure consumers to the brand. Rather, we wanted [customers] to understand what we were doing. We wanted to [bring] the parts of SunChips’ sustainability [efforts] that were invisible into the visible, the intangible into the tangible. You can’t do that with a jingle.”

Key to the effort was emphasizing the small steps people can take toward sustainability. The landing page at SunChips.com challenges visitors with the question: “Can one person make the planet greener, better ... happier? We think so.”

“Saving the planet is pretty daunting,” Jones notes. “One of the philosophies our customers have embraced is [taking] small steps, breaking things down into manageable chunks. Change is difficult to impart on a long-term basis, but SunChips’ consumers understand they can effect change by taking small steps. SunChips is one of those small steps.”

When SunChips committed to the compostable bags, Juniper Park created a one-time advertisement that ran during the popular *American Idol* program April 21, 2009, the evening before Earth Day. The 45-second spot used time-lapse photography to demonstrate how the new bag, which will be in use by Earth Day 2010, completely disintegrates over time.



COMPANY	FRITO-LAY NORTH AMERICA
HEADQUARTERS	PLANO, TEXAS
BRAND	SUNCHIPS
YEAR ENDING JULY 2009 SALES*	\$307,534,115
YEAR ENDING JULY 2008 SALES*	\$292,107,177
SUNCHIPS AD AGENCY	JUNIPER PARK, TORONTO

*Source: Information Resources Inc., Chicago. Sales include supermarkets, drug stores, gas/convenience stores and mass market retailers, excluding Walmart. Also excluded are sales from club stores and liquor stores.



Frito-Lay will introduce a SunChips package in 2010 that will decompose in 14 weeks when placed in an active compost pile.

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The commercial was followed by the announcement of the partnership with the National Geographic Society to fund five local environmental initiatives with \$20,000 grants and a series of print advertisements in publications such as *People* magazine. The company also made extensive use of social media sites such as YouTube and Twitter.

“This is one of those things where it’s advertising, but it’s not contrived,” Quinn says. “SunChips is now a part of the conversation people are having in their own heads, which gives us an invitation to enter their lives.”

The campaign did more than generate millions of page views and thousands of calls to SunChips’ toll-free telephone line for comments. It also captured numerous awards including the 2009 Effie Award (from the AMA’s New York chapter) for green products and the solar power launch, an Ogilvy Award for the entire campaign and a Communications Art Award for the use of a solar-powered billboard trumpeting the product.

“The response has been off the charts in terms of positive feedback,” Jones adds. “We peg it to the authenticity of the campaign.”

As consumers become more concerned about the environment they are rewarding companies that embrace sustainability and environmental issues.

“We’re seeing this as an increasing driver in why people buy what they buy,” says Aneysha Pearce, an associate partner in the Chicago office of the San Francisco-based consultancy Prophet. “The prime driver is still value, but we also are seeing social responsibility becoming increasingly important.”

But, Pearce adds, attempts to embrace the green movement in advertising only work if it is part of a company’s overall strategy. “It has to really be a part of their business strategy and be an authentic extension of the brand that demonstrates ongoing commitment.” ■



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