

# **Selling Efficiency amid the Green Revolution: Innovative Marketing Approaches at Three Statewide Efficiency Programs**

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## **ABSTRACT**

For years, marketers of energy efficiency programs have attempted to promote the energy and non-energy benefits of efficiency—with limited dollars and varying levels of success. But in recent years, something wonderful has happened. Suddenly, “green” is “in.” Consumers are recycling and buying energy efficient products. They’re talking about carbon footprints and global warming. They’re interested in learning ways they can save energy and preserve the environment. This paper examines how three statewide efficiency programs are marketing energy efficiency amid this paradigm shift.

Vermont, Oregon and Wisconsin have all promoted the benefits of energy efficiency for more than a decade. Each has employed different strategies to reach its audience and each has responded differently to the growing mainstream acceptance of energy efficiency. Currently, Vermont is reaching out to the state’s residential and business communities with two “real-life” advice columns designed to educate consumers about energy efficiency and help them make smart energy decisions. Energy Trust of Oregon has rolled out a pilot community-based marketing effort that engages a network of community activists in championing good energy solutions in homes and businesses. And Wisconsin ran a “What can green do for you?” campaign aimed at helping businesses take the first step to “going green.”

This paper outlines the specifics of these campaigns as well as the results, respective to each campaign, to date—including but not limited to increases in Web traffic, public relations impressions or energy reviews.

## **Introduction**

There was an increased interest in “green products” in the early 1990s (Energy Center of Wisconsin 1997) that later disappeared or slowed. The interest in “green” and “climate change” has connected (The Climate Group 1997) with consumers and businesses and renewed their interest in energy efficiency. This renewed interest gives state programs an excellent opportunity to motivate the public to take action. The three examples in this paper—Vermont’s advice columns, Oregon’s community outreach program and Wisconsin’s “What can green do for you?” ads—all attempt to increase the awareness of energy efficiency through unique campaigns.

## **Efficiency Vermont**

Efficiency Vermont developed two “real-life” advice columns, one targeted at residential customers and one at owners of small- to medium-size businesses. The residentially focused “Ask Rachael” column appears weekly in community papers and utility newsletters across the

state, as well as daily publications, while “Energy Solutions,” a business column, runs in the state’s three business journals.

Both columns are intended to teach consumers about energy efficiency and to help them take steps to improve efficiency in their daily lives. By addressing common energy questions and repackaging dry and oftentimes technical subject matter into a fun, friendly and accessible read, the columns deliver useful information to a broader audience. In addition, the columns promote and support the Efficiency Vermont brand, which has a reputation for being a trusted, objective, expert resource on energy efficiency. Consumers benefit from the columns by saving money and energy, and the state benefits by decreasing its overall energy use.

### **“Ask Rachael” for Residents**

In 2004, Efficiency Vermont began a public relations campaign to address growing interest and questions from residential customers about energy efficiency and its impact on their homes.

Efficiency Vermont worked with a local branding/public relations firm, Kelliher Samets Volk, to create “Ask Rachael,” a “Dear Abby”-style column that answers common energy efficiency questions with practical, do-it-yourself answers for homeowners. The objectives were three-fold:

- To heighten Vermont consumers’ awareness of Efficiency Vermont
- To communicate simple energy efficiency tips that homeowners can implement
- To increase energy efficiency participation throughout the state

Efficiency Vermont decided the best way to make these tips accessible for the average consumer would be to deliver them using a friendly female personality in a simple, straightforward style. Furthermore, program managers believed a female spokesperson would help Efficiency Vermont connect with its primary audience, women ages 35–64, who tend to be the primary decision makers for purchases of household products. Ultimately, Efficiency Vermont chose Rachael Pendleton, a business development specialist and former technical customer service specialist for the company, as the face of the campaign—and the “Ask Rachael” brand was born.

The customer service staff at Efficiency Vermont plays an instrumental role in identifying topics and developing questions for the column, drawing from the types of inquiries they see most frequently. Topics are also dependent on other factors, such as the time of year and the seasonal rebate offers available at the time of printing and distribution. For example, columns in the summer months focus on indoor cooling and comfort and highlight energy efficient products such as ENERGY STAR® qualified air conditioners. Typical questions include:

- Does it take more energy to turn my TV and lights on and off than just leaving them on?
- Are there energy-efficient bulbs we can put into our recessed can fixtures?
- Will I use less energy in a house with a boiler, or one with a furnace?
- How do I prevent icicles from forming on my roof?

Once topics are selected, the technical experts at Efficiency Vermont provide answers. Finally, the writer crafts the message in Rachael’s voice—smart, friendly and straightforward.

Efficiency Vermont chose community papers as the primary placement for the “Ask Rachael” column. As Vermont is a small state with many tiny towns, traditional large media outlets reach only a portion of the population. Community papers are often the primary means of locally focused information and “Ask Rachael” seemed a natural fit, especially for reaching those Vermonters who do not read the major daily newspapers. In addition, as “Ask Rachael” became more successful, the format would allow it to be easily adapted for radio, television, and other traditional and non-traditional media.

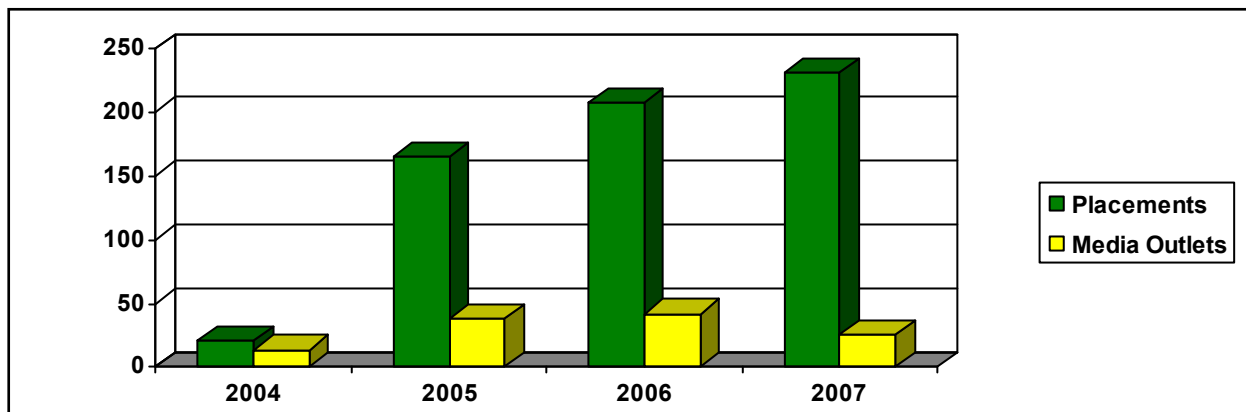
“Ask Rachael” (Figure 1) officially launched in September 2004 with 21 columns in 14 newspapers, reaching a total circulation of 244,236 (approximately 39.3% of the state’s population of 621,394 (Vermont Department of Health 2006). Phone feedback was solicited from several papers running the column about its reception in their markets. This feedback was overwhelmingly positive and over the years, Efficiency Vermont has gone from proactively pitching the column to receiving requests to run the column. In subsequent years, Efficiency Vermont has worked to expand the reach of “Ask Rachael,” first to additional community newspapers, and then to radio and television outlets across the state. Currently, the “Ask Rachael” columns run in publications that reach all 14 Vermont counties, fulfilling Efficiency Vermont’s objective of increasing the reach of its messaging throughout the state.

**Figure 1. “Ask Rachael” Example**



Frequency of publication in individual papers varies based on several factors, including available space, but on the whole, publications are printing the column more frequently. In fact, despite the decrease in media outlets (In 2007, several publications that published the column went out of business, switched to an on-line-only format or altered their frequency of publication), circulation has improved approximately 3,200% since launch. In 2007, the column was placed 231 times in 26 media outlets with a total circulation of 7,873,113 (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. “Ask Rachael” Media Placements 2004–2007**



In 2007, the *Rutland Herald*, an award-winning daily newspaper, became the first major Vermont daily to run “Ask Rachael.” It was soon joined by the *St. Albans Messenger*, another daily. The addition of these large-circulation publications greatly increased the amount and frequency of Rachael’s readership.

According to Efficiency Vermont customer service representatives, approximately one-third of the calls and emails they receive are “Ask Rachael” contacts. Every column ends with an invitation to submit questions to an email address created specifically for “Ask Rachael”—askrachael@efficiencyvermont.com. A customer service representative or technical specialist reviews each submission and responds to the customer with an answer within two business days.

All columns, past and present, are posted, under topic, on the Efficiency Vermont Web site at [efficiencyvermont.com/pages/Common/askrachael](http://efficiencyvermont.com/pages/Common/askrachael). Today, “Ask Rachael” is the most popular section of the Efficiency Vermont Web site, averaging 75,376 visits in 2007 with a typical visit lasting 2.25 minutes.

### **“Energy Solutions” for Businesses**

In 2007, Efficiency Vermont adapted “Ask Rachael’s” column format for the business market. This outreach was introduced to support Efficiency Vermont’s goals around the small commercial market, including developing cost-effective ways to reach Vermont’s broad commercial audience.

Program managers identified the audience as the majority of commercial customers in the state: small- to medium-size businesses such as grocery stores, motels, banks and restaurants rather than one- or two-person “mom-and-pop” operations or the large commercial and industrial market, both of which would require different approaches. The overall objectives were:

- To help business customers understand the benefits of energy efficiency
- To increase awareness of energy efficient opportunities within a reader’s business, and to provide examples of how other businesses are reaping the benefits of energy efficiency
- To position Efficiency Vermont as an expert resource for businesses and to educate customers on the ways Efficiency Vermont can help them

Unlike the “Ask Rachael” column which offers a short Q&A through one efficiency expert, the business column would have to address specific business considerations in addition to energy efficient technologies—such as the equipment’s impact on the company’s bottom line, simple payback, effects on worker productivity, and other non-technology benefits and issues.

To address these needs, program managers developed a monthly “discussion column” format and named the new column “Energy Solutions.” The column (Figure 3) features a dialogue between Dan Mellinger, an engineer and Efficiency Vermont business energy service project manager, and Paul Lambert, a business development manager. Dan and Paul respond to Vermont business people’s questions by discussing issues back and forth, each providing insight based on his own area of expertise. The tone of the discussion is more formal than “Ask Rachael” to help position Efficiency Vermont as a practical and professional business resource. In addition, to accommodate the increased space needs of the larger content, the “Energy Solutions” column is longer—approximately 500 words per column—double the length of a typical “Ask Rachael” column.

With feedback from a variety of sources, including the editor of the three business publications that publish the column, “Energy Solutions” was shaped into a resource that balances technical and non-technical information, with a mix of quantitative and anecdotal content. The finished product achieves readability and flow well suited for the business reader.

Discussion topics are selected based on their alignment with Efficiency Vermont market goals and the needs of the marketplace. To date, subjects have included financing, lighting, refrigeration, and insulation. Questions to date have included:

- As an owner of a small business, money is always top of mind. I know I can save on my energy bills by making my business more efficient, but the up-front costs are an obstacle. How can I make energy efficiency work on my limited budget?
- I own a convenience store in the Burlington area. Lately, I’ve seen articles about people saving significant amounts of money on their power bills after switching to energy-efficient lighting. I’d like to do the same, but I don’t want to sacrifice aesthetics. How does energy-efficient lighting stack up to what I have now, and what kind of savings can I expect if I switch?

**Figure 3. “Energy Solutions” Example**



“Energy Solutions” was pitched to the editor of the top three business publications in the state—the *Champlain Business Journal*, the *Rutland Business Journal* and the *Valley Business Journal*. Combined, these monthly publications have a circulation of 34,900. The editor and publisher requested and were granted exclusivity to these columns, forming an unprecedented partnership between Efficiency Vermont and these publications.

The columns began running in April 2007. The editor of the Journals praised the readability of the columns and said they “provide readers with real scenarios that business journal readers can relate to, situations they themselves may be experiencing. The ability to glean insight from two energy experts is a great service to these readers.”

The column is now also available on the Efficiency Vermont Web site ([www.efficiencyvermont.com/energysolutions](http://www.efficiencyvermont.com/energysolutions)). While no long-term data is yet available, the response to this new on-line content has been positive. Since February 1, 2008, the on-line “Energy Solutions” column has received approximately 550 hits versus 8,000 hits for the “Ask

Rachael” column. Visits to the site (both repeat and one-time only) and length of visit will be tracked.

Web visitors are prompted to submit their “Energy Solutions” questions on an easy-to-use form. Customer service representatives review and respond within two business days. Since February 2008, the customer service representatives have only received two forms.

While the audience of “Energy Solutions” is much smaller than that of “Ask Rachael,” expectations are high that the column will be one of the more popular pages of the business market-focused pages on the Efficiency Vermont Web site. It is also expected that it will take a few months for the site to “catch-on” with visitors and build to a sustained level.

### **Efficiency Vermont Summary**

The “Ask Rachael” and “Energy Solutions” columns have become invaluable resources for Vermont residents and business owners by making energy efficiency easy to understand and relevant to their homes and workplaces. While direct linkage to kWh savings is not yet possible, the popularity of the columns supports high awareness of the Efficiency Vermont brand. With high readership across the state, both columns have succeeded in promoting Efficiency Vermont as the state’s leading authority on energy efficiency, shaping consumers’ views about energy efficiency, and deepening their understanding of how they can benefit from making smart energy decisions. This persuasive information can encourage the adoption of energy-efficiency practices and technology.

### **Energy Trust of Oregon, Inc.**

Oregon’s state energy program, Energy Trust of Oregon, is reaching out with a community-based campaign that shows residents simple ways they can use less energy in their homes and businesses. The “Corvallis Energy Challenge” is a yearlong, multi-pronged collaborative effort by the Corvallis Sustainability Coalition, a network of citizens and organizations working together to accelerate the creation of a sustainable community, and Energy Trust. The goal is to help Corvallis citizens increase their energy efficiency and reap the benefits of clean, renewable power. The campaign challenges community members to take action in their homes and businesses, beginning with energy reviews that identify energy-saving opportunities and assess the potential for solar energy projects.

### **Corvallis Energy Challenge**

For Energy Trust of Oregon, the Challenge is a fresh approach to promoting its programs: engaging an entire community in a focused, long-term campaign. Community-based strategies have proven successful in other locations (e.g. Davis, CA; New London, WI; Poultney, VT) (Hewitt et al. 2005), and Corvallis provides an ideal setting for this Oregon pilot because there is clear concern in the community about sustainability—as evidenced by the creation and continued growth of the Corvallis Sustainability Coalition. The Energy Challenge dovetails with the Coalition’s goal of accelerating the creation of a sustainable community, and the more than 80 member organizations of the Coalition provide a strong, grass-roots network for promoting the campaign. Ultimately, the Challenge will help Corvallis residents and businesses to use energy more efficiently, control their energy costs and build a cleaner future with renewable energy.

## Collaboration

Spearheaded by the Corvallis Sustainability Coalition and Energy Trust of Oregon, the Challenge reaches citywide and into Benton County to involve individuals, community organizations, local government and businesses. Utility support comes from:

- Consumers Power Inc., in collaboration with the Bonneville Power Administration, to provide program support to homes in the Consumer Powers service territory. (Energy Trust services are available to customers of electric utility Pacific Power and natural-gas provider NW Natural.)
- NW Natural—promoting residential and business enrollment of its Smart Energy carbon-offset program
- Pacific Power—promoting participation in its Blue Sky renewable energy program

## Timing

The Corvallis Energy Challenge launched March 3, 2008, and ends February 28, 2009. Even after the Challenge ends, Energy Trust programs will be available to Corvallis residents, and the Corvallis Sustainability Coalition and community members will continue the focus on sustainability efforts.

## Components

The Corvallis Energy Challenge includes outreach, education and intensive promotion of Energy Trust programs that are designed to improve the energy efficiency of residential, commercial and industrial properties while fostering the growth of renewable energy.

Key features include:

**Free Home Energy Review<sup>1</sup>.** This is the foundation of the Corvallis Energy Challenge. Members of the Corvallis Sustainability Coalition will sign up 1,000 pre-1993 Corvallis homes for a Home Energy Review. Experts from Energy Trust and, during summer months, fully trained students from Oregon State University, will conduct the reviews and identify measures homeowners can take to save energy. They will also make a preliminary assessment of the homes' suitability for a solar installation. The review includes installation of up to 10 free compact fluorescent light bulbs, water-saving showerheads and faucet aerators. Homeowners will be encouraged to install two or more energy-efficiency measures identified in the review.

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<sup>1</sup> Energy Trust services are available to customers of Pacific Power and NW Natural. To qualify for a free Energy Trust Home Energy Review, a home must be heated by Pacific Power electricity or NW Natural gas.

Consumers Power offers incentive programs for its customers, with support from the Bonneville Power Administration. Information can be found at [www.consumerspwer.org](http://www.consumerspwer.org).

The Oregon Department of Energy administers the State Home Oil Weatherization (SHOW) Program, which serves Oregon households that heat with oil, propane, kerosene, butane, or wood. SHOW-eligible homeowners can conduct their own energy audits and apply for cash rebates for installed weatherization and heating measures. Information can be found at [www.oregon.gov/ENERGY/CONS/RES/weather/weahome.shtml](http://www.oregon.gov/ENERGY/CONS/RES/weather/weahome.shtml).

**Rental property reviews.** The campaign will engage renters, including students, to challenge their landlords to sign up for a free Home Energy Review (if the home is free-standing) or participate in Energy Trust's multifamily program.

**Business energy walkthrough assessments.** The campaign will target at least 50 small- to mid-sized businesses to identify energy-efficiency opportunities, and work with these companies to implement measures.

**Manufacturing/industrial reviews.** The campaign will also encourage manufacturing/industrial businesses to make energy-efficiency and/or renewable energy investments. Energy Trust offers scoping studies and cash incentives for industrial processes of all kinds—including large industrial, manufacturing, agriculture and water/wastewater treatment.

**Cash incentives for measures.** The ultimate goal of the Challenge is to increase energy efficiency and the use of renewable power. Energy Trust supports energy efficiency for all sectors and a variety of renewable energy generation, including solar, biopower, wind, small hydro and (emerging) geothermal. Potential solar electric customers are encouraged to attend seminars that explain the logic of making efficiency improvements first. Our energy reviewers make this case in person for homeowners and business managers.

As energy reviews reveal opportunities, homeowners and businesses will be encouraged to take action. Specifically, they will be challenged to install two or more efficiency or solar measures, or make contractual agreements to do so, by February 28, 2009. Energy Trust offers cash incentives to homeowners, multifamily property owners and businesses for qualifying energy-efficiency measures as well as solar electric and solar water heating installations. Certain projects may also qualify for Oregon energy tax credits and federal tax credits.

**Solar installations.** Potential solar electric and water heating installations will be identified through the Home Energy Reviews and business walkthroughs. The campaign goal is to enlist local solar contractors to install 65 new systems in Corvallis homes and businesses.

**Trade ally contractor support and development.** Energy Trust maintains a Trade Ally Network of heating and cooling contractors, insulation specialists, window installers and solar contractors who install measures that qualify for Energy Trust incentives. During this campaign, Energy Trust will recruit more trade allies to serve the Corvallis area. By becoming an Energy Trust trade ally, members benefit from lead referrals, cash incentives, technical training and co-op advertising funds.

**Utility sustainable power programs.** As part of the challenge, NW Natural will encourage residential and business enrollment in its Smart Energy carbon-offset program. Pacific Power will continue to recruit participation in its Blue Sky renewable power program.

**Municipal initiatives.** Energy Trust will explore opportunities for projects with the City of Corvallis, identify those with the greatest potential for success, and work with the City to pursue those projects. Possibilities include: generating electricity from methane that is currently flared at the wastewater treatment plant; installing solar water heating for Osborn Aquatic Center; and helping the city upgrade the efficiency of its facility operations. Other than the wastewater



treatment plant's flared methane, the city of Corvallis has no good option for co-gen. However, Oregon State University is close to concluding its plans to replace aging central boilers with a gas-fired co-generation plant that will generate 50% of the university's electricity needs and produce steam for central heating.

**Program Web site.** CorvallisEnergyChallenge.org, offers visitors information on measures, incentives, tax credits in addition to the opportunity to sign up for a home or business energy review and provides links to program sponsors and resources.

**Other elements.** The Challenge is intended as a flexible program that will evolve over the course of the year to respond to community needs and emerging opportunities.

## Campaign Launch

To introduce the Corvallis Energy Challenge and engage the community, the Corvallis Sustainable Coalition and Energy Trust conducted an aggressive campaign launch, which included marketing pieces (Figure 4), from March 3–8. Representatives from approximately 70 Corvallis Sustainability Coalition organizations received Home Energy Reviews. In turn, Coalition members began recruiting 1,000 Corvallis homeowners (There are a possible 123,000 housing units in Corvallis—51% owner-occupied and 49% renter-occupied.) to sign up for reviews. Energy Trust also conducted energy walkthrough assessments of five small- to mid-sized businesses (Corvallis has approximately 2,000 small- to mid-sized business) and solar assessments at several City of Corvallis facilities. An energy workshop for industrial/manufacturing businesses was conducted as the final event in the kick-off week.

**Figure 4. Corvallis Energy Challenge Marketing Samples**



## Campaign Benefits

The campaign offers residents and businesses many benefits:

- Information about low-cost, no-cost energy savings steps
- In-person assistance in identifying specific energy efficiency and renewable energy opportunities that can help manage energy costs

- Assistance tapping Energy Trust cash incentives and state tax credits that can help make energy-saving and renewable energy improvements more affordable
- Assistance connecting to contractors qualified to install measures
- A sense of connection to the community-wide grass roots sustainability initiative, and satisfaction in knowing their efforts support the city's greenhouse gas reduction goals

### **Energy Trust of Oregon, Inc. Summary**

The Corvallis Energy Challenge will help Energy Trust of Oregon determine the effectiveness of a community energy outreach program. It will also demonstrate to what degree an engaged community can control its energy usage and benefit through savings and increased sustainability. Six to nine months into the program a process evaluation will document the program's structure, goals, delivery, including added costs above traditional program delivery, along with early indicators of performance. Several months after the pilot ends, an impact evaluation will measure costs and results achieved through the community energy program and compare these to costs and results of Energy Trust's typical approach to program delivery.

### **Wisconsin Focus on Energy**

Focus on Energy, Wisconsin's energy efficiency and renewable energy initiative, developed a new marketing campaign designed to encourage businesses to "go green." Anchored by the phrase, "What can green do for you?" the campaign targeted business customers with the message that it's easy to take the first step towards being green and in turn, be energy efficient.

The campaign was designed to increase awareness of the Focus on Energy programs and communicate the ways these offerings can help Wisconsin businesses save energy and money. Because "green" is such a popular buzzword in today's society, the advertisements in this campaign were carefully developed to emphasize this concept in copy and design.

### **Campaign Strategy**

The campaign consisted of both print and online advertisements. Both were built around the theme and developed in unison to include "green" images related to business.

Part one of the campaign consisted of two print advertisements (Figure 5) which began running in April 2008 issues of publications. In both instances, the concepts were designed to draw the reader's attention to the fact that an organization can make green changes at their facility—specifically energy efficiency changes.

**Figure 5. The “What Can Green Do for You?” Print Ads**

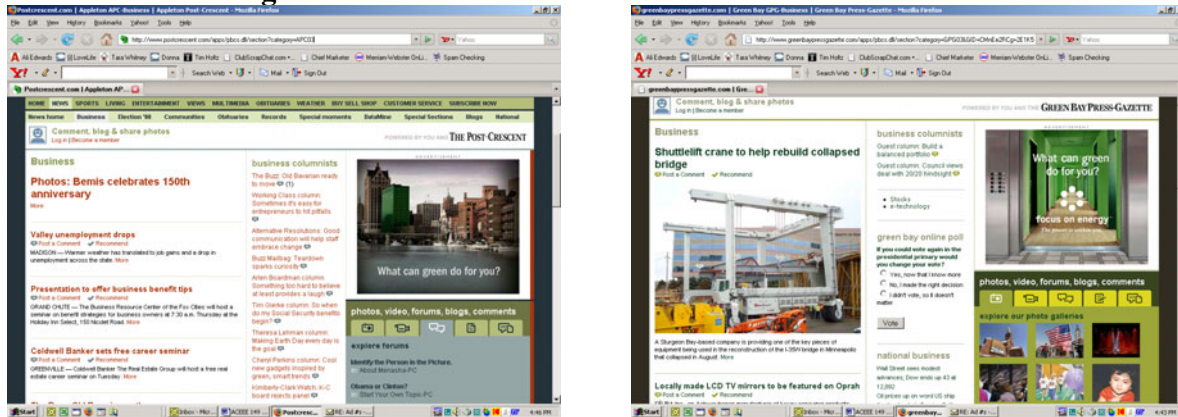


Both print ads ran during the April-December 2008 media schedule, and appeared in a variety of trade publications (e.g. *Industry Week*, *Today's Facility Manager* and *Building Operating Management*). The ads also ran in Wisconsin-based business publications such as; *The Business Journal*, *Corporate Report Wisconsin* and *Business Watch*.

The effectiveness of the print advertising campaign will be tracked by measuring visits to the Focus on Energy Web site. Each advertisement was given a unique URL to determine which publication received the most visits. At the time this paper was written, the ads were just beginning to run and only ten visits, from these unique URLs, (Alfke, 2008) were tracked to date.

Part two of the campaign consisted of online advertising which began in April 2008 and ran weekly through September 2008. Again, two ad versions (Figure 6) were used and appeared in the business sections of newspaper-affiliated Web sites throughout Wisconsin, such as *JournalTimes.com*, *greenbaypressgazette.com* and *FDLReporter.com*. Click-through rates from the publications' sites will be tracked and measured; enabling Focus on Energy staff to determine which publication provided a higher number of referrals, as well as evaluate the effectiveness of the campaign. At the time this paper was written, the ads had been running approximately three weeks. The average click-through rate, which measures the difference between the number of people that clicked on the ad (and were directed to the Focus on Energy Web site) versus the number of times that ad was shown, (Wikipedia 2008) was .25% which is close to the advertising industry standard of .26% (Wirtz 2008).

**Figure 6. The “What Can Green Do for You?” Online Ads**



## Focus on Energy Summary

Focus on Energy’s new ad campaign, “What can green do for you?” used visual cues to emphasize one of today’s most popular buzzwords—“green”—and attempted to capture the attention of Wisconsin business people. Once hooked, prospects received information about the benefits of energy efficiency, how energy efficiency can positively impact their bottom line and the services Focus on Energy could provide. Early results of the campaign are encouraging, but at the time of this paper there was insufficient data to make a definitive conclusion about the campaign’s success. Focus staff will review and evaluate the click-through rates (online ads), visits to the unique URLs (print ads) and the visits to the business section of the Focus on Energy Web site after three months and six months to gauge if the campaign was successful in increasing awareness of the program.

## Conclusion

These days “green” is everywhere, from clothing labels and cars to sitcoms and sporting events. After years of apathy, the public and the media are interested in energy efficiency, in living and working greener to save energy and help protect the environment (Makower 2008). All three of the examples described in this paper, show different ways that businesses, consumers and communities are being targeted with a “green” message and that the audiences are open to the message more than before—evidenced by participation in the programs, visits to Web sites and responses to newspaper columns.

Now that the door is open and the public is listening, Efficiency Vermont, Energy Trust of Oregon, and Wisconsin Focus on Energy are expanding their efforts to motivate people to take action. While each campaign takes a different approach, all share a common goal: to educate people about the benefits of energy efficiency and explain that whether at home, at work, or in their communities, a simple step is all it takes to be greener (i.e., save energy). Early results of these projects indicate increased interest in the energy efficiency or “green” message and will help the programs be successful in increasing energy efficiency and renewable energy implementations.

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