

Marketing Sustainability: Can wine be green without greenwashing? Vineyard View By Cliff Ohmart

Up until now, the sustainable winegrowing programs of which I am aware have been dedicated to education and self improvement, with regions and states coming together to develop programs to help themselves move along the sustainable farming continuum. One aspect of sustainable winegrowing is only now beginning to emerge, and that is marketing winegrapes and wines produced using sustainable practices. It is an essential aspect of sustainable winegrowing for the simple reason that if one cannot sell their wines in sufficient amounts, the vineyard and winery will go out of business, in other words they will not be sustainable.

While marketing is essential to a sustainable business, the process can have a very different feel to it than the process of self-improvement in vineyard and winery management. The goal of sustainable winegrowing is to leave a smaller environmental footprint and contributing in a positive way to the local community. The goal of marketing is to add value to and sell more winegrapes and wine. While there is no code of ethics for marketing, in my opinion the wine industry should market sustainability based on facts and resist the temptation to overstate the virtues of one green strategy or another. Moreover, the fact that sustainable winegrowing is such an all encompassing paradigm provides some significant challenges to developing a simple, yet meaningful marketing message. Many fear that greenwashing is a real threat.

What is greenwashing? I cannot believe that in the process of writing this column I have referred to Wikipedia for a second time in my life. They define it as “a term that is used to describe the act of misleading consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company or the environmental benefits of a product or service” (www.wikipedia.com). They also go on to report that greenwashing was coined by suburban New York environmentalist Jay Westerveld in 1986, in an essay regarding the hotel industry's practice of placing green placards in each room, promoting reuse of guest-towels, ostensibly to "save the environment". He noted that in most cases little or no effort toward waste recycling was being implemented by these hotels and concluded that the actual objective of this ‘green campaign’ on the part of many hoteliers was, in fact, profit increase. Hence this and other outwardly environmentally-conscientious acts that have a greater, underlying purpose of profit increase was ‘greenwashing’ in his estimation.

If I am interpreting this correctly Westerveld seemed to feel connecting profit with environmental good deeds is bad. I do not agree with that. In fact I think practicing sustainability is good business and if it increases profitability then adoption will come even faster.

Making a Complicated Topic Simple

It is clear that the consumer is paying more attention to a sustainable marketing message even though many are confused as to what the term ‘sustainable’ means. As mentioned

above, the temptation for marketing might be to focus on one aspect of sustainability instead of the complete picture.

Packaging is one example. There is wine in a box/Tetra packs vs. glass bottles vs. PET bottles, synthetic closures vs. cork, recyclable packaging, and so forth. From an energy standpoint, the argument for producing wine in a box, or wine in plastic bottles is compelling. Glass is heavy and you have to burn a lot of carbon based fuel to move it around so if you put wine in a box or a PET bottle you are leaving a much smaller carbon footprint regarding transportation. Furthermore, producing glass creates about 45% of the carbon dioxide produced in the winemaking process, which includes transporting the grapes and the bottles to the winery, according to Dr. Roger Boulton at University of California Davis¹.

While very important and useful, the carbon footprint concept is very complex and should be dealt with as such. It is an extremely popular topic at the moment, given the attention that climate change has attracted and, on the surface, appears to be something that can be discussed in simple terms. However, there is more to it than meets the eye. For example, it has been asserted by some that the greatest climate impact from the wine supply chain comes from transportation. However, Dr. Boulton reports that transportation accounts for less than 20% of the CO₂ production in the winemaking process vs. the 45% from glass manufacturing mentioned above. Moreover, greenhouse gas emissions per bottle of wine shipped depends on how it is shipped and for how many miles. The most efficient form of shipping, in relation to fuel consumption, is by boat and the least is by truck, differing by a factor of over 700, and rail is much more efficient than trucking as well. Is buying wine from New Zealand in a PET bottle more sustainable than buying wine in a glass bottle from some place in the US? This is a complicated issue.

While the carbon footprint is a great yardstick and deceptively easy talk about it is only a portion of the complete sustainability picture. Greenhouse gas production does not give us a measure of a company's commitment to things such as landscape planning, human resources, water use efficiency, water quality, air quality, or wildlife habitat enhancement.

While on the topic of carbon footprints, if a company claims it is carbon neutral, the only way this can be possible is if it purchases carbon credits or has a solar array that produces as much energy as is consumed in the process of wine production, from growing the grapes to the final delivery of the bottle to the retailer. If anyone says they are carbon neutral in part because their vineyards are sequestering carbon it turns out that not enough is known yet about the magnitude of carbon sequestration by vineyards to make this claim. So being carbon neutral may not be a good measure of the carbon footprint of a company if they are achieving it mainly through purchasing carbon credits. It is important to look at a company's carbon budget and to see how they achieved carbon neutrality, not just look at the bottom line.

¹ From a seminar presented at a workshop in Davis, California in 2007 on climate change and the wine industry.

Green Credentials Vs. Greenwashing

Sustainable winegrowing is a positive and proactive experience and if we are going to use it in marketing I think we should all make an effort to do so in a manner that is a reflection of what it is.

Many wine regions around the US have devoted years and large amounts of dollars developing and implementing extremely successful sustainable winegrowing programs. Here are some examples. The sustainable winegrowing program developed by the Lodi Winegrape Commission began in 1992. Since then they have been holding all types of grower education events focusing on sustainable winegrowing, they published and implemented the *Lodi Winegrower's Workbook* in 2000, and launched the *Lodi Rules for Sustainable Winegrowing (Lodi Rules)* third party certification program in 2003 and now almost 10% of their vineyard acres have achieved certification (www.lodiwine.com and www.lodirules.com). The Central Coast Vineyard Team (CCVT) published and implemented California's first sustainable winegrowing self assessment workbook in 1996, and have been holding all types of grower education events focusing on sustainable winegrowing since then, including the Sustainable Ag Expo for the last 3 years (www.vineyardteam.org). The Napa Valley Sustainable Winegrowers Group formed in 1995 and has held regular meetings on sustainable winegrowing and published an IPM guide with regional specific information (www.nswg.org). The California Association of Winegrape Growers (CAWG) and the Wine Institute joined forces in 2001 to form the California Sustainable Winegrowing Alliance to implement the *Code of Sustainable Winegrowing Practices Workbook* program which has had huge penetration into the communities of California winegrape growers and wine makers (www.sustainablewinegrowing.org). Fish Friendly Farming is a program in the north coast area of California that has been going since 1999 and is a certification program for vineyard properties that are managed to restore fish and wildlife habitat and improve water quality (www.fishfriendlyfarming.org). Washington State created *VineWise*, their on-line self assessment workbook, in 2003 (www.vinewise.org). This year, after several years of careful development, New York State launched the *NY Guide to Sustainable Viticulture Practices* (<http://www.vinebalance.com/>). And finally, the outstanding sustainable winegrowing program Oregon LIVE., certified by the International Organization of Biological Control, has been going at least since 1999 (www.liveinc.org).

Conclusion

So what is a good way to market sustainability? As I have already mentioned, sustainability is complex and does not lend itself well to sound bites. However, if the term sustainability is to survive as a meaningful label in the marketplace we must try to craft a simple message that is an accurate representation of what it is. Otherwise, the word will simply become one companies can use to mean whatever they choose.

One of the simplest, yet most powerful descriptions of sustainable winegrowing is the three E's or the triple bottom line. It is growing winegrapes and making wine that is environmentally sound, socially equitable and economically viable. An even simpler expression is the three P's; people, profit, plant. This triple bottom line is also what makes sustainability unique among other farming paradigms. Therefore it makes sense to use this uniqueness in marketing sustainability. Rather than focus on one aspect of the sustainable production of wine, a 'good' sustainable marketing program should focus on all aspects. But how many companies can develop the ultimate sustainable program? I don't expect any company to have the 'perfect' sustainable program because it is not possible to grow grapes and make wine to sell without leaving an environmental footprint. I think we all have to come to grips with this fact and realize the goal is continual improvement. The goal is to move as far along the sustainability continuum as we are able to and tell our customers of the story of how we are doing it rather than try to market the fact that we have achieved complete sustainability, which is impossible, or touting one's program at the expense of another.