

# THEY MEAN GREEN

BY MICHELLE TAUTE

Three design firms prove that sustainability and success are compatible. Let them inspire your efforts to go green.

With all the hype about environmentally friendly design, it's easy to conic down with a case of green fatigue. Luckily, there are a lot more compelling issues to consider than the basics of FSC-certified paper or energy-efficient lightbulbs. We found three firms that will change how you think about green design.

They're approaching sustainability as an exercise in creative problem-solving, and as a result, they're redefining everything from agency business models to the creative process. Read on to find a variety of compelling ways to put your graphic design skills to work in service of the planet,

**ECO MAN**

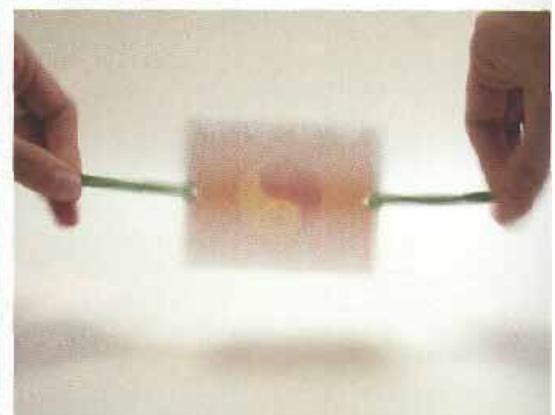
Chad Rea scrapped his successful ad agency and suburban lifestyle (well, the agency, anyway) to launch ecopop, an idea-sharing and development firm.

*"I had to stop protecting my ideas, especially the ones that could potentially create positive change in this world. Ideas are worthless unless they're set free."*

CHAD REA



**LENNIS PACKAGING**  
Celery Design's projects often find a better destiny than a landfill. This lightbulb package (left) morphs into a groovy lampshade.



#### BUILD IT GREEN

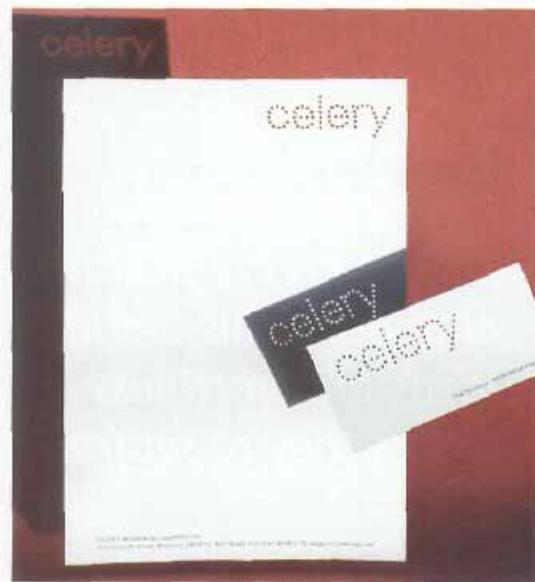
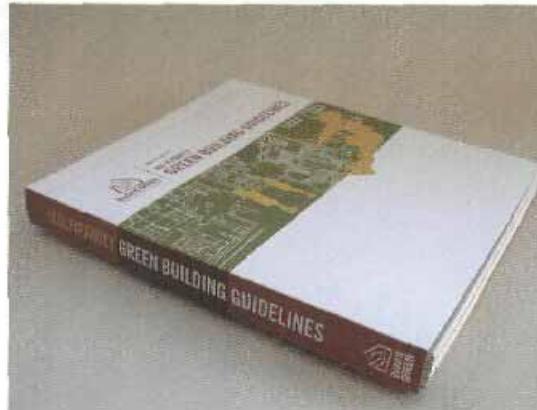
To save space on the press sheet, these "Green Building Guidelines" have perforated tabs that readers pop out to navigate between sections.

#### CELERY PROMOTION

Celery's identity system (below) creates an impact by subtracting rather than adding.

#### CARBONCOOL IDENTITY

The firm designed a certificate for designers who participate in AIGA's CarbonCool offset-purchase program.



## CELERY DESIGN COLLABORATIVE: THINK BACKWARD, MOVE FORWARD

Brian Dougherty is something of a guru when it comes to environmentally friendly design. He's a frequent speaker on the topic, the author of the book "Green Graphic Design" and a partner at Celery Design Collaborative. As you might expect from a firm based in Berkeley, CA, Celery has long been ahead of the trend, with an eye toward green design since the company started in 1997. But Dougherty's real genius lies in how he frames questions surrounding graphic design and the environment.

Rather than just a materials problem, he views green design as an innovation challenge. "Sustainable design should be better than what we currently consider good design," Dougherty says. "It's a higher level of design. It's not just design dressed in hemp and Birkenstocks."

While considering paper and manufacturing processes is important to the green design practice, he believes the bigger problem is figuring out a better way to run businesses and communicate with audiences. It's an approach his firm takes with clients large and small, including Hewlett-Packard, Mattel, Elephant Pharmacy and Alameda County.

The team at Celery bypasses the status quo with a process called Design Backwards, which is just what the name implies. Rather than start brainstorming about what they want to make, they'll begin with the project's eventual demise. Where will the finished design ultimately end up? In a landfill? Or a recycling bin? What's the best destiny for this design? Then they keep taking one step back at a time to think about user experience, distribution and manufacturing—with each new decision supporting the ones before it. "It really changes the way that you approach a design project," Dougherty says. "And I think it frees up the designer to think more radical thoughts."

This process also can create *it* much richer set of ideas for a design than a creative brief and a few sketches. A good case in point is Celery's package design for a Dutch company that makes LED lightbulbs. While the client asked for an updated rectangular box, Celery offered a second option based on its Design Backwards process: a package that turns into a lamp shade. It fulfills the best destiny, making the package part of your life, and creates a surprising consumer experience. The pyramid-shaped package

opens up like a flower, and people can flip it inside-out to form a new home accessory.

While this might cost more than a simpler design, it also stands out in comparison to the plastic clamshells that hold most compact Duorescents. The Design Backwards process bakes sustainability into the design, and it also produces concepts where the benefits outweigh extra costs. "I think where designers excel is not on cutting costs but on adding value," Dougherty says. "Let's think about how the design can change the user experience and add value to the user experience instead of just accepting the status quo as being the end all and be all and then trying to match the cost of the status quo."

Celery's wins, however, aren't always as quick and flashy as the lampshade box. The firm worked with Hewlett-Packard on the company's first corporate responsibility report in 2002, for instance, and while it was nicely done, the piece was still an 80-page print document. In the years since, Celery has slowly migrated more of the project online and made the printed components more targeted. The most recent report includes a web piece, a 20-page print document (created in 18 localized versions), an overview brochure, and a CD-ROM that holds all the reports and can be handed out at meetings.

Dougherty believes targeted materials can contribute to sustainability in two key ways. First, they're communicating in the correct language and talking about local issues, so people might be more likely to respond. If a project's response rate is 5%, for instance, then 95% of the pieces constitute waste, so every bit the response rate increases also reduces the amount of waste. Second, these pieces can be printed locally rather than shipped around the world. And with digital printing, people can print things as they're needed—even 50 brochures before a meeting. "The most important thing that I think designers can do is to make a more effective piece," Dougherty says.

He hopes designers seize the opportunity to shake things up and change the norm, realizing their potential to make design more effective and more sustainable. Ultimately, Dougherty wants to frame the sustainability conversation so it's not merely about recycled paper. "If it's just about recycled paper, then this movement will pass," he says. "It's going to be a fad, and it will pass through, and graphic design will not be any different 10 years from now than it is now."

## MOXIE SOZO: BYE-BYE, CARBON

Moxie Sozo lives up to all the best stereotypes about Boulder, CO. The design firm is as progressive, environmental and outdoorsy as the city it calls home. Case in point: Moxie bills itself as the first graphic design firm in the world to be carbon-neutral, zero-waste and powered by 100% renewable energy. And that's not just a hollow marketing point. The firm spent week researching the claim: "I was really nervous we'd make that statement and someone would come back and call us out on it," says Leif Steiner, founder and creative director.

But so far this bold declaration—and the actions and philosophy behind it—have brought the firm nothing but good karma and like-minded clients. A start-up soap company on the East Coast, for instance, found Moxie by searching online for "zero-waste, carbon-neutral design firm" and hired them after taking a look at their work. Steiner says his 14-person firm spends anywhere from \$2,000 to \$5,000 a year on all its environmental initiatives, but the company's green values have landed many times that amount in new business. They also help strengthen relationships with existing clients, a list that includes Newman's Own, GoLite, SmartWool and Sierra Designs.

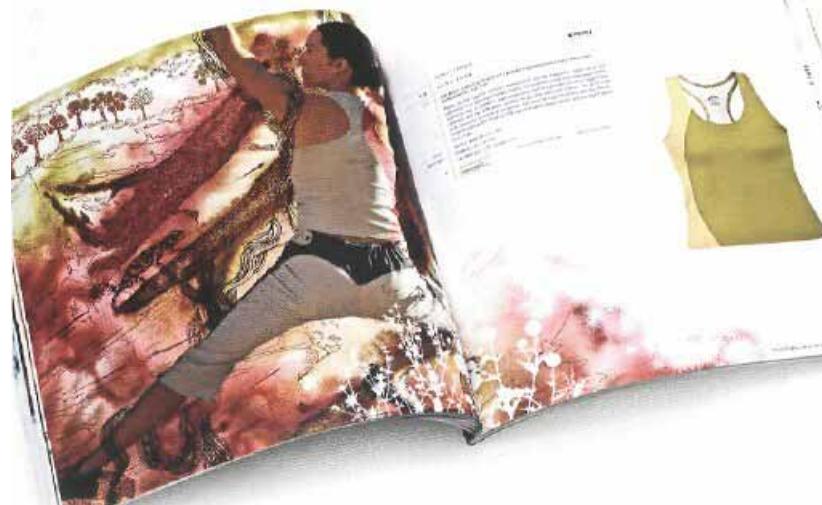
Steiner founded Moxie in 1999, and while being environmentally and socially conscious has always been part of his vision, the firm officially became carbon-neutral about a year and a half ago. It's a process that's simpler than you might expect. Moxie used an online calculator to figure out its impact, doubled for good measure and purchased offsets from a company called NativeEnergy. The design firm accounted for office power consumption, as well as business travel via planes and automobiles. Moxie also pays NativeEnergy to support wind power in proportion to office electricity use and gives employees free bus passes as a green perk.

These behind-the-scenes efforts combine with the firm's more visible attempts at being kind to the Earth. "When you walk in the door, one of the first things you'll see is huge recycling bins," says designer Teri Gosse. "The trash cans are hidden." Staff members recycle everything from office paper and ink cartridges to Styrofoam packaging and the remnants of lunch. For the latter, there's a small composting bin in the office that's emptied into a mini composting dumpster.



### GOLITE CATALOG

This Golite catalog by Moxie Sozo mixes photography and illustration to create a subtle storyline that bridges seasons.





GOLITE PACKAGING

**Moxie Sozo** designed a triangle-shaped box to stand out on store shelves. The small holes let you peek inside without opening the package.



## FLEXIBLE SYSTEM

The firm designed packaging for 10 tents, but they managed to do it with only three boxes. These packages vary in size to accommodate the tents; stickers communicate the different product names and features.



Moxie pays to have it picked up once a week. But despite these efforts, Steiner admits that zero waste is a bit of a misnomer. The company still produces about two pounds of garbage *every* week, because some things—like pens, lightbulbs and bottle caps—just aren't recyclable.

All these efforts support one of Steiner's core goals: using Moxie Sozo Lo do a little good in the world. In addition to the recycling and carbon offsets, he accomplishes this lofty task by partnering with clients who share similar values and intentions. In fact, Moxie turns down prospects that don't seem like a good fit, preferring to focus on creating high-quality work for a select group of businesses. "We approach client relationships almost like a marriage," Steiner says. "We are looking at it in the long term. You want to pick someone who you're going to gel along with. You want your clients to pick you because they know they're going to get along with you."

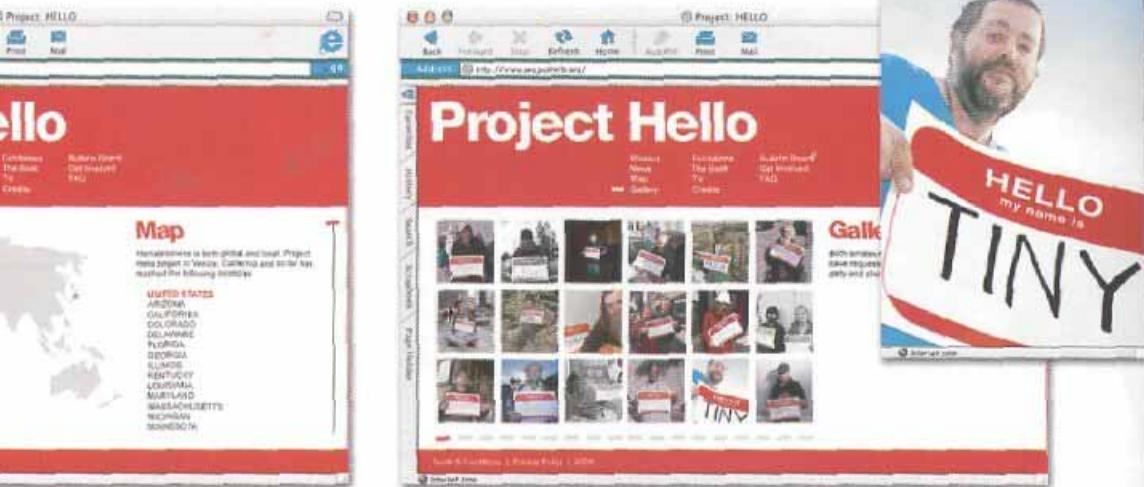
And thanks in part to this careful matchmaking, Moxie has never lost a client. It has been the agency of record for GoLite, for example, since 2002, and it's not hard to see how the pair makes a perfect couple. While GoLite wasn't initially attracted to Moxie because of its green values, co-founder and chief environmental officer Kirn Coupounas says it's definitely one of the reasons it has stayed. The outdoor gear company now has a long-term commitment to eliminating its environmental footprint, and Moxie's green IQ has factored into this and countless other projects. Coupounas recently wrote a glowing letter of recommendation for the Moxie team, and says working with them feels like they're part of the GoLite family.

In fact, one gets the sense that there's a genuine desire to give back—both to the planet and other people—around Moxie headquarters. The firm raised roughly \$50,000 for victims of hurricanes Rita and Katrina by spearheading the Hurricane Poster Project; which sold posters created by designers around the world. Then there are actions of the more everyday variety. It's not uncommon to see hikes in the office, and when half the employees head out for caffeine in the middle of the afternoon, they choose the coffee shop with cups that can be composted. Even the paper towels in the firms bathroom can be chucked in the compost bin, and Moxie staffers are gently encouraging other tenants in their building to *dry* their hands with the planet in mind.



**PROJECT HELLO**  
Chad Rea got the idea for Project Hello after watching a homeless person's face light up when a passer-by addressed the individual by name. The project includes pictures of homeless people from all over the world holding oversized, hand-written nametags. It's meant to give names and faces to people who are often an invisible part of society.

**ECOPOP IDEAS**  
Rea's idea incubator is in gear; he continues to explore some ideas initiated under the 86 the onions umbrella. A gold porta-potty displayed at the Coachella Valley Music Festival (opposite, top left) aimed to raise support for music education. The Do Bottle (top center), a biodegradable plastic bottle with soil, fertilizer and seed, is meant to be filled with water and tossed into a vacant lot. Rea created his ecopop stationery (top right) by stamping "another recycled idea from ecopop.com" across the back of his old 86 the onions papers. The postcards (below right) are a personal project.



## ECOPOP: STARTING OVER

In September 2007, Chad Rea sent out what everyone refers to as his "Jerry Maguire letter." The roughly 12-paragraph manifesto announced that Rea was closing his successful nontraditional branding agency. 86 the onions. Or, as he put it, "86 the onions as you know it has been 86ed." He shuttered the office, let go of the full-time employees and walked away from an enviable client list that included Target, Starbucks, ESPN X Games and Mountain Dew. All so he could focus on solving problems with a greater purpose.

Now he runs a one-man, Los Angeles-based venture called ecopop. And while it gives him the freedom to work exclusively on projects with an environmentally or socially responsible bent, it has also meant starting over. He had dreamed of having a dog, a convertible and his own agency on the beach since he was 16. But after achieving that vision at 35, Rea wasn't sure he wanted to do it anymore. "It's quite scary to take everything that you've known and everything that's comfortable and completely walk away from that and basically say, 'I am not who I used to be,'" Rea says.

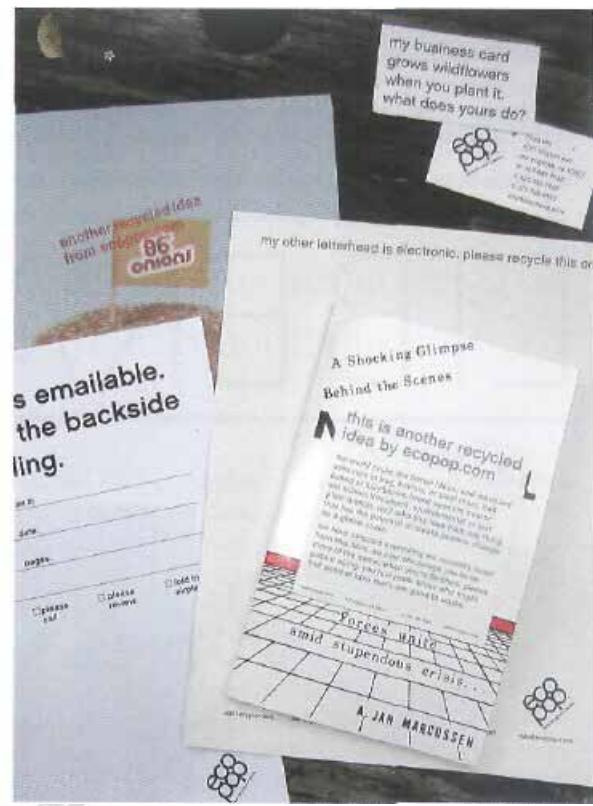
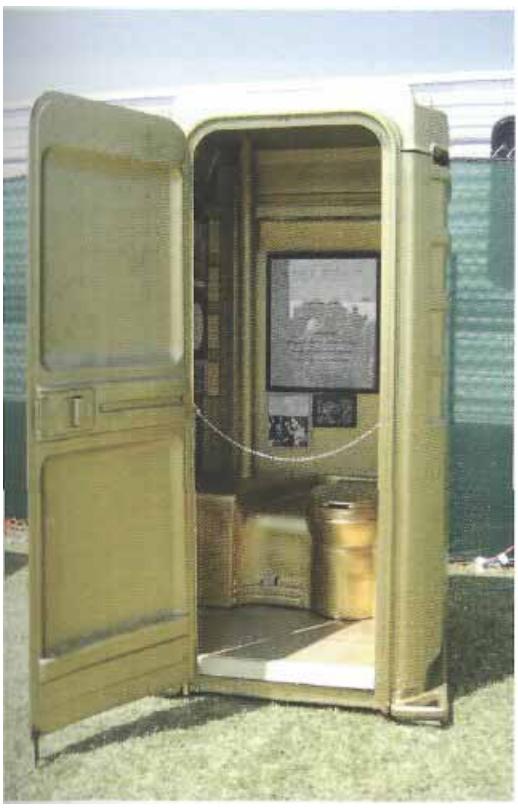
The real turning point came in 2004 when he was invited to speak at the Clio Awards about Project Hello ([www.projecthello.org](http://www.projecthello.org))—a philanthropic effort he created to help give a name to the homeless community. The project involved photographers all over the world taking pictures of homeless people as they held up oversized, handwritten name tags. During the Clio talk, Rea looked at the 200 creative problem-solvers in the room and had an epiphany: The problems they're asked to solve don't really matter. "It's like, 'Nobody is drinking my soda. Nobody is driving my car,'" he says. "If we could take this talent and apply it to some of the world's problems that really need solving, we might just solve them."

Rea struggled to balance the demands and overhead of running an agency with his desire to do good 100%

of the time, so he ultimately decided to shut down the 5-year-old business in favor of a more agile venture. Ecopop allows him to pull in collaborators as needed and focus on creating positive change through three key business areas: product development, branded content and consulting. The first follows the designer-as-entrepreneur model and makes up the largest chunk of the business, with ecopop developing products and services it either owns or co-owns with other brands. Right now Rea's working on about 10 products, including TV shows, video games and a web 2.0 property.

Even over the phone Rea's energy and enthusiasm are contagious, but he still doesn't have enough time to execute all his ideas. And that's one reason he launched [ecopop.com](http://ecopop.com) earlier this year. Rather than a ho-hum portfolio site, it's a free idea exchange focused on the convergence of ecology and pop culture. Rea reports on interesting news and businesses, and offers up the kind of ideas that Fortune 500 companies once paid him to provide. "I used to have a hard drive full of ideas that would never get made because I was hoarding them," he says. "I had to stop protecting my ideas, especially the ones that could potentially create positive change in this world. Ideas are worthless unless they're set free."

Browsing through the site gives you a window into how the wheels turn in Rea's head and what he hopes to accomplish with his new business. There's a piece called "Organics are the New Generic" about creating an anti-brand where the best product in each category is simply called what it is, such as pasta sauce or aspirin. Another post expounds on the frustrations of talking to SUV-driving relatives about your own green values. But amidst all these self-driven projects, Rea has also found time to tackle more traditional client work. He's done work for Live Earth, the Audubon Society and The Alliance for Climate Protection, and he recently created a commercial for MTV Switch.



The latter is the network's campaign to raise awareness about global warming, and while it's definitely a green project, ecopop's focus<sup>1</sup> didn't land Rea the job. John Jackson, director of public affairs for MTV Networks International, says he hired Rea for his creative chops and ability to tackle a serious topic without being preachy. In fact, Jackson praised how Rea made a spot on global warming thought-provoking and even aspirational for the network's young audience. The commercial's soundtrack features a spoken-word artist performing a series of words that are all linked together, such as "drive time machine head phone jack rabbit" to help illustrate how everything is connected. It's slated for distribution in more than 100 countries.

Like Tom Cruise's character in *Jerry Maguire*, Rea seems to be reaping the benefits of his manifesto, and perhaps that movie forms an appropriate metaphor for all the firms profiled here. They're taking risks, following personal beliefs and redefining the way the design industry does business. ■■■

*Michelle Taute is a Cincinnati-based freelance writer and a frequent HOW contributor.  
www.michelletaute.com*

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