

# Connecting With the Conscious Consumer

Products inspired by nature are appealing to consumers who have an eye on natural health and wellness.

By Cynthia R. Jasper, PhD

A growing number of people are becoming aware that the products they buy and consume may have an impact on them and the environment. These consumers often are called Conscious Consumers. They include people of diverse age groups, such as Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964), Gen X-ers (those born between 1974 and 1980), and Gen Y-ers (those born before 2000).

There are other well-established groups that also practice a form of impact-based consumerism, such as Cultural Creatives, LOHAS (Lifestyles of Health and Sustainability), and Naturalite consumers who, while not having the same agenda as the Conscious Consumer, do share the group's concern for how products work. Conscious Consumers (Figure 1) have been studied since the 1970s, but they have recently gained increased attention as the market for this group has grown — thanks

in part to the explosion in social media propagation and capabilities. Now many retailers and manufacturers are seeking ways to connect with these consumers, whose needs include eye-care products, such as contact lenses and lens care solutions.

Products that are inspired by nature, also known as bio-inspired products,<sup>1</sup> are one component of the Conscious Consumer market. A product is considered to be bio-inspired if



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**Figure 1. Conscious Consumers consider the origin of the products they buy and the impact those products may have on their health and the environment.**



**Figure 2. The self-cleaning system used by the lotus plant inspired a fabric called GreenShield, which has water- and stain-resistant properties.**

it takes a system that occurs in nature and utilizes it for other purposes. For eyecare products, that might entail having a lens that works as an integral part of the eye and not as an accessory to it. The Crystalens, manufactured by Bausch + Lomb, is a good example of this. This lens flexes and bends using the eye muscle, just like the eye's natural lens would, in order to focus on objects at varying distances. Conscious Consumers may be drawn to these types of products because they believe that nature's designs are effective, efficient and work in harmony with the environment. Some examples of bio-inspired products include the following:

- A fabric called GreenShield mimics the system for self-cleaning used by lotus plants (Figure 2), thus achieving water- and stain-resistant properties while using significantly less fluorinated chemicals in its manufacturing than other water- and stain-resistant materials.<sup>2</sup>
- The Nike Free running shoe was inspired by the biomechanics of barefoot running.<sup>3</sup>
- Modern swimsuits, developed by Speedo and designed to improve swimming speed, were inspired by dolphins, sea turtles and penguins (Figure 3).<sup>4</sup>
- Velcro, which most of us use every day in some form or another, is based on the hundreds of hooks that cover the burdock seed (Figure 4).<sup>5</sup>

Other products, such as engineered fabrics and wettable or water-repellant surfaces, are being explored in laboratories or are in product development at this time.

## Health-Related Bio-Inspired Products

Bio-inspired materials and treatments are already making their way into all segments of health care. For instance, joint replacements to which a bioactive protein has been applied result in enhanced tissue healing, improved bone growth around the implant and strengthened attachment and integration of the implant to the bone.<sup>6</sup>

Dentistry is using titanium implants with surfaces made of apatite (a group of phosphate minerals), which results in the rapid adhesion to and formation of bone that allows patients to recover jaw movement and strength in a couple of weeks versus 2 to 4 months.<sup>7</sup>

In dermatology, biologics such as alefacept (a fusion protein that combines part of an antibody with a protein)<sup>8</sup> are being used to treat patients with psoriasis. This treatment is unique because it pinpoints certain immune responses that trigger the disease, instead of targeting the entire immune system.<sup>9</sup>

Even moisturizers are bio-inspired. Vaseline Sheer Infusion treats the top layer, core and deep layers of skin, unlike other moisturizers that treat only the top or bottom layers of surface skin. This is accomplished by using glycerol quat, which is a combination of glycerin (an organic compound) and a



**Figure 3. Swimwear designed to improve swimmer speeds was inspired by dolphins, penguins and sea turtles.**

quat (a positively charged group of molecules that attach to negatively charged skin proteins).<sup>10</sup> This combination is less lipophilic and binds to four times more water molecules than glycerol.<sup>11</sup>

**Size of the Market**

Conscious Consumers are becoming an increasingly large and powerful part of the consumer market. In general, they tend to be female, educated, have at least an average income, are least price sensitive, read product labeling and have influence over the buying decisions of their families.<sup>12,13</sup> The estimated total market for these consumers is quite large (about \$230 billion a year) and it is still growing.<sup>13</sup> One analysis shows that between 2009 and 2013, the bio-inspired personal care product market segment alone is expected to total \$11.7 billion in sales.<sup>14</sup> As bio-inspired eyecare products follow the lead of personal care products, the overall Conscious Consumer market should continue to expand.

**Appealing to Conscious Consumers**

The case study that follows will help elucidate who the Conscious Consumer is and how he or she thinks. Members of this demographic derive a strong sense of identity in their independence from what they perceive to be a fad, a trend or what they regard as a sales pitch. The Conscious Consumer is found across socio-economic lines, so what a product communicates about a consumer's socio-economic status is of lower importance to them. In fact, a product strongly identified with socio-economic status may be an "anti-choice." This is not to say that a Conscious Consumer would be disinterested in a bio-inspired product that is also fashionable. Their decisions are made after considering ethical alternatives<sup>15</sup> and lifestyle goals, while also recognizing their own financial limitations.<sup>16</sup> Marketing

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to a Conscious Consumer is a unique challenge. They will not categorically reject all product claims, but they will evaluate the merit of the claims themselves. Thus, the most logical way to market to this group is to make them aware that bio-inspired products are available, then let them decide for themselves.<sup>13</sup>

**Conscious Consumer Case Study**

A case study was conducted to illustrate the mindset and values of consumers who fit the Conscious Consumer profile.

"Ada" is married with two grown children. She participates in her local community theater and has an advanced degree. She is an environmental and science-conscious consumer. There is a burgeoning cohort

of people much like Ada — people who are concerned with their personal health, the natural environment and the human environment of society. They are educated yet pragmatic, and though independent in thought, they are willing to work with like-minded people to further causes they deem important. Each of these people has a unique life story, and each will tell you they do not fit into a narrowly defined consumer demographic category. Nevertheless, there are common threads to how life experience shapes their values and influences their choices when it comes to consumer products.

Ada engages in many of the practices that Conscious Consumers normally do, but these are done after practical consideration rather than due to blind conformity to a group mentality. In her home, she uses compact fluorescent energy-saving light bulbs. Her family is signed up for the "Smart Grid" program in which the electric company switches their heat pump on and off to mitigate the need to build new power plants. Ada sees these steps



**Figure 4. Velcro was inspired by the hundreds of hooks that cover the burdock seed.**

as good citizenship, though they are financially rewarding as well.

Ada drinks cranberry juice every day on her doctor's advice because it has a therapeutic effect and prevents the formation of microbial bio-films, which can lead to diseases that require the use of antibiotics. Ada sees minimizing her need for antibiotics as beneficial to her because she has reduced her chances of getting ill, and good for society in that there is a need to prevent the spread of antibiotic-resistant bacterial infections and keep antibiotics "in reserve" for people with serious illnesses.

In addition to using cranberry juice to promote her health, Ada uses natural substitutes for chemical cleaning products to maintain her house whenever possible. She is not averse to using chemical products with the proper precautions, but she utilizes natural substitutes in order to protect her pets from inadvertently ingesting cleaners or their residue and becoming ill.

Ada and her family enjoy preparing homemade foods. One of their favorite items to make is mead, which is a beer-like drink that contains lemon. Ada uses organic lemons to prevent pesticide residue from being combined into the drink. She is also wary of how the fermentation process may affect pesticides in the mead mix, thus giving her another reason to use organic lemons in her recipe.

## The Future of Conscious Consumerism

The life story of each Conscious Consumer is unique. Their personal experiences and education have an effect on their purchasing habits. It is easy to generalize that a bio-inspired product may appeal to social concerns in general, but Conscious Consumers are pragmatic in their product choices — they make consumer decisions based on their own evaluation of the benefits of the product, not just because doing so follows a trend.

The market for Conscious Consumers, those who are interested in bio-inspired products, is growing. Until now, most of the bio-inspired products available have been developed as tools to perform tasks that were being done inefficiently or while utilizing man-made materials. The next wave of bio-inspired products will be homeostatic in nature, helping people maintain or augment their own body's functions, such as by promoting eye health or performance.

It is important to acknowledge the needs and wants of the Conscious Consumer, meet their demands and connect with this emerging part of the consumer market. When Conscious Consumers are aware of bio-inspired products, they will apply their education and life experiences to make informed decisions regarding the purchase of those products. **CLS**

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