



L.L. Bean Toddles Into Chicago, Expands 'Green Store' Push

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L.L.BEAN IS BRINGING ITS BOOTS to Chicago, opening its first store ever outside the Northeast corridor. What's more, this will be Bean's seventh "green" store, built to U.S. Green Building Council's LEED standards as the privately held company tries to leverage its outdoorsy nature-loving image in a brutal retail environment.

Currently, the company has nine stores outside Maine, as well as its large headquarters compound in Freeport, Maine, and extensive catalog and Web businesses. But it has said it intends to operate 32 stores by 2012, and that all new construction will meet LEED standards. Its new 30,000-square-foot store--expected to open in September at the Arboretum at South Barrington, a Chicago suburb--will incorporate "creative use of recycled and reclaimed materials as well as state of the art energy efficient heating, cooling and lighting systems." (While its stores are being built to LEED standards, none have been certified yet by USGBC.) *

In addition to outdoor sports gear along with our other popular lines such as kids', men's and women's casual apparel, the company says the Chicago store will also include Bean's Outdoor Discovery School, where expert instructors offer "Walk-On Adventures" and introductory classes on everything from kayaking to fly-fishing.

Bean's use of green building seems like a no-brainer--this is, after all, one of the few stores in the world that contains its own trout pond and sells canoe-shaped coffee tables.

But experts say pioneers like Bean can rapidly lose their green edge, as dozens of other retailers rush to a similar positioning. Recently, stores as varied as REI, Office Depot, Staples, and Tesco's Fresh & Easy have announced plans to build LEED-certified buildings. And even the most mainstream retailers--including Safeway, Wal-Mart and Target --have announced extensive environmental initiatives.

And while that's great news for the environment, it may not so great for those who staked the first green claims, says Cathy L.



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Hartman, a professor of marketing at Utah State University, Logan, who has researched how consumers respond to clean products and technology. They can lose their competitive advantage.

What's more, she says, companies often miss an opportunity to connect the green advantages of their products with "core, mainstream consumer values. When you make an environmental improvement, you need to explain to consumers how it will benefit them," Hartman says. "Maybe it will save them money, by offering higher mileage, or offer health and safety advantages. Maybe it's symbolism."

But for any green initiative to be successful, she says, "there has to be some way to connect the green product--in this case, the store--to some solid measure of customer satisfaction."

Many stores, for example, including Bean, have brochures and plaques, which explain design features. At Bean's new hunting & fishing annex in Freeport, for example, signs explain that the new building is constructed from salvage materials; other plaques point out solar features.

Hartman thinks retailers would be wise to take it even further. "Why not put up signs that say, 'Breathe easier--our buildings are environmentally safer'? We know people are more productive when they work in green buildings--why not explain that to the consumers?"

L.L.Bean, however, says there are sound financial reasons for green building, not just brand-enhancing reasons. "It makes good sense, environmentally," says the Bean spokesperson. The goal is to step it up and work with leaders in promoting green building. That makes it more accessible for all, and then more cost-effective for everybody."

Besides, she adds, Bean customers expect environmental leadership from L.L.Bean. "We have a very vocal and honest consumer group, and they do express concerns, and give us accolades. The feedback we've gotten from our green buildings is 'Great move, this is perfect.'"

Nor is Bean worried that they will lose their pioneer status. "Green building is a moving trend," she says, "but it's not mainstream yet."

*Editor's note: The article was amended after posting.
Sarah Mahoney can be reached at sarah@mediapost.com*