

Discounts that do good

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GREEN CITY Coupon books don't tend to be of much use to green-minded consumers or businesses. They're usually just chock full of special offers from fast food restaurants and wasteful chain stores. That's why former credit auditors Anne Fisher Vollen and Sheryl Cohen started the Green Zebra Savings Guide. They wanted to use the good old-fashioned clip-outs to draw customers to, and educate them about, environmentally conscious companies.

"It is our hope that discounts will give Green Zebra users incentive to try out a new green alternative to a traditional product or service," Vollen told the *Guardian*. "Then if it lives up to their expectations, [we hope] they will continue to patronize that business even without the discount."

First published in San Francisco in 2007, Green Zebra promotes bargains for enterprises such as green retailers, bike shops, and independent bookstores. It also offers useful educational tips on topics such as greening your home, purchasing eco-friendly beauty products, and creating a zero-waste lunch. To make it into the book, companies have to meet two of the following criteria: they must offer a discount on a green product or service, run their business in a sustainable manner, be locally owned, and/or contribute significantly to the community.

This past year, Vollen and Cohen expanded the guide to include separate editions for Marin County and the peninsula. Helping people buy from Bay Area businesses rather than larger chains is a critical aspect of Green Zebra's mission. By promoting independent, locally owned firms, Vollen said, "We are not only strengthening the local economy but also helping preserve the uniqueness of San Francisco, rather than contributing to the strip-mallization that has become so rampant in the US."

Vollen understands that living in modern day America makes it hard, if not impossible, to reform everything about our lives. But she hopes Green Zebra will encourage people to start with small steps, inspired by issues they're passionate about. The mother of two and MBA graduate told us her own personal passion of late has been finding ways to eliminate water bottle waste. "Less than 10 percent of bottles get recycled, and it's a petroleum product," she said.

The guide's mode of production also embodies the spirit of doing what we can to minimize our impact on the planet. Each edition, Vollen said, is printed on "100 percent recycled fiber, 98 percent postconsumer waste paper, processed chlorine-free." In addition, Green Zebra offsets its carbon emissions by helping to fund a methane digester at a family farm. The digester not only takes climate-warming methane out of the atmosphere, it turns the gases into renewable electricity. Another way Vollen and Cohen hope to lead by example is by donating roughly 50 percent of the guide's proceeds to charity. A portion of this year's profits went to the San Francisco Green Schoolyard Alliance, an organization that teaches children eco-friendly gardening, architecture, and design skills.

Most Green Zebra sales are through public and private school fundraisers, but copies of the guide are available for purchase online at www.thegreenzebra.org.