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Selling a Lofty Concept (Clean Energy) by Appealing to a Basic Desire: Free Beer

By TIM MURPHY
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Hiroko Masuike for The New York Times

Gregory Altman enjoyed a free Brooklyn Lager while talking with Lorrie Clevenger, an employee of Community Energy, after he signed up to use wind power.

To shake up an often apathetic public, environmentalists have sometimes appealed to fear (warnings about rising seas, [Al Gore's](#) movie) and theatrics (tree-hugging, crying American Indians on TV).



This weekend, they were trying something that was new, yet as old as human desire. At an eco-festival at a park on the East River in Manhattan, men and women mostly too young to recall the “Keep America Beautiful” Indian came across an aqua-blue sign that spelled it out in no uncertain terms: “Sign up for clean energy and drink free beer.”

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Those who signed up for electricity from Community Energy, which owns three wind farms in New York and Pennsylvania, received tickets for four pints of Brooklyn Lager at the third annual Citysol festival in Stuyvesant Cove Park, at the end of 23rd Street. (Brooklyn Brewery is powered by Community Energy windmills.)

“It’s a fun, easy incentive” to switch to clean energy, said Chris Neidl, who came up with the idea. “And it chips away at the holier-than-thou reputation of the environmental movement.”

Mr. Neidl works for Solar One, the environmental-education group that sponsored the festival and that has its headquarters at the park in a cottage roofed with solar panels. The event, which ends today, is itself a giant act of green marketing, using music and art to make the message go down more easily.

A few hours into the kickoff on Thursday night, a curious crowd had gathered at the Community Energy table, as hundreds of other people listened to the band Dragons of Zynth and perused art installations, including an igloo made of recycled plastic bottles. Everything at the festival was powered by the cottage’s solar panels and a loudly thrumming biodiesel generator.

Mike Adams of Community Energy laid out the deal: Those who showed up with their last Con Ed bill — or who called the company on the spot to retrieve their account number — could sign up to switch energy sources from a traditional fossil fuel, like natural gas or coal, to his company’s wind-powered alternative.

Mr. Adams continued his pitch: Join the roughly 1 percent of all energy consumers in the state who have made the switch in recent years and you will be increasing the demand for wind energy. That, in turn, would help eliminate the \$4 to \$7 a month that wind power now adds to the average monthly utility bill, he said.

For those who were not making the switch, the Brooklyn Lager was selling for \$5 (\$4 for refills in the compostable cup). Mental calculators whirred.

Gregory Altman, 34, an international development consultant who lives in Chelsea, scoffed at the math and took the free beer.

“I don’t care,” he said. “I’m already up to \$100 on my cellphone bill and over \$100 on my Internet and cable. A few dollars extra a month for clean power just isn’t that big a deal.”

Free beer also went to Bennett Gilbert, a 34-year-old marketing director from Murray Hill. He had heard about the offer in advance and brought along his utility bill, and, like Mr. Altman, said that the importance of using clean energy trumped the few dollars extra per month.

Still, he regretted that the festival was not serving Brooklyn Brewery’s other beers. “I might have had the hefeweizen,” he said. “But I’m not going to kill them for it.”

Organizers said more than 1,500 people attended the festival yesterday. And by last night, 55 people had signed up for wind power. Many others said they might do so later without beer by contacting Con Ed, which transmits the wind power through its distribution lines. (Last year's festival, which took place over four consecutive Saturdays, netted about 160 switchers, Mr. Adams said.)

In a crowd that already leaned toward the green-savvy, others said they had already switched, including Brett Beyer, 28, a photographer. He asked Jeff Cheek, a Community Energy worker, if he could get free beer retroactively.

"Nice try," Mr. Cheek said.