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**A different stripe
Green Zebra coupon book hopes to clip environmental waste,
raise awareness**

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Chronicle / Darryl Bush

Anne Vollen (left) and Sheryl Cohen of Green Zebra stand next to produce and their coupon books at Farm Fresh to You in San Francisco's Ferry Building. Chronicle photo by Darryl Bush



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Coupon books are shown on some produce at Farm Fresh to You in San Francisco's Ferry Building. Chronicle photo by Darryl Bush

San Franciscans who want to clip something green can now look past their lawns and bushes -- to a new environmentally focused coupon book.

Two local women have published a coupon book similar to the ubiquitous Entertainment Book, with its coupons for two-for-one dinners and 10 percent merchandise discounts.

But their new Green Zebra book has a twist -- its coupons are for businesses that the publishers have deemed environmentally friendly.

The offerings include discounts at restaurants serving organic food; a free compact fluorescent bulb from a neighborhood hardware store; a free pet bath at a kennel that composts its dog droppings; and \$150 off an organic-fiber mattress from a store specializing in environmentally friendly home products.

"It's a healthier, more green alternative to the Entertainment Book," said Anne Vollen, who started the company with longtime friend Sheryl Cohen.

The Green Zebra book, which retails for \$25 and includes coupons for 143 businesses, is part of a growing trend of environmental business directories. The Celilo Group -- a Portland, Ore., company that publishes green coupon books in the Northwest and Minneapolis -- will start a coupon book in the East Bay this year. And Greenopia, a Los Angeles firm with a Zagat-type guide to "green living" in Southern California, plans to produce a San Francisco edition this spring.

These publications hope to ride a wave of consumer interest in environmentally friendly products. Nationwide sales of organic food, for instance, have risen from less than 1 percent of total food sales in 1998 to 2.48 percent last year, according to the Organic Trade Association.

But publishers of these guides hope to do more than capitalize on the current market of eco-conscious consumers. They also want to expand that market.

Nik Blosser of Celilo said he and his partners started their Portland coupon book in 2000 as a way to find buyers for environmentally friendly products.

"We went around and asked sustainable businesses what they needed to expand, and they said, 'More awareness about us,'" Blosser said.

From an initial printing of 10,000 books, Celilo grew to its total print run of 100,000 coupon books in Portland, Seattle, Minneapolis and, as of September, the East Bay.

Green Zebra is also starting with a print run of 10,000 books this year.

Vollen said the idea grew out of her experience with the Entertainment Book. "I bought the Entertainment Book but never used the coupons because I didn't want to support the fast-food and chain stores they represented," she said.

Both Green Zebra and the Celilo coupon books use the same model of volunteer-driven sales as the Entertainment Book. Although the books are available in stores, much of their distribution is done by schools and nonprofits as a fundraising strategy.

That makes publishing coupon books a more complicated endeavor than publishing a traditional business directory.

"It's a very challenging sales model," Blosser said. "It requires a lot of patience selling through a very fragmented market run by volunteers. We have 150 schools using the book in Portland, but it's taken us seven years to get there."

Creating a coupon book with an environmental focus poses an additional challenge -- determining meaningful criteria for inclusion as a "green" business. These days even big corporations are trying to appeal to eco-conscious consumers with products like organic Cheetos.

"You have to make sure that the products and services that businesses are offering are truly sustainable solutions, and not just greenwashing," said Denise Hamler of Coop America, a nonprofit group that has published a nationwide directory of green businesses for more than 25 years. ("Greenwashing" refers to crafting a positive public image for practices that are environmentally harmful.)

Vollen and Cohen decided that companies could be listed if they met two out of the following three criteria:

- They sell an environmentally beneficial product or service.
- They are local, independent and community-oriented.
- Their business practices are good for the environment, such as a shoe store that has installed energy-efficient lighting and recycles its boxes.

But the women acknowledge that they made exceptions. For instance, they included some local businesses that don't have a particular environmental focus, such as Timbuk2 bags, Books Inc. and various day spas and yoga studios.

"There's definitely a degree of wanting to make the book marketable, and people like spas," said Cohen.

"Books Inc. is not a green business, but people are still going to buy books and we'd prefer them to support a small local business than to buy from Amazon," said Vollen. Books Inc. has several stores around the Bay Area.

Green Zebra started out trying to charge businesses for inclusion in the coupon book. But then it changed gears and included them free. "It was so much work to get people to pay, like four or five meetings, because we weren't proven," Cohen said.

Cohen and Vollen haven't decided whether to charge for inclusion in next year's edition. But they have decided to add a second coupon book covering Marin County in 2008. They claim the value of the discounts in the San Francisco book is \$12,000.

Initial response has been good, according to some participating merchants.

Clifford Waldeck, owner of Waldeck's Office Supplies in the Financial District, said about 10 customers have come in with Green Zebra coupons since the book went on sale in autumn. Six more people have used the coupons for online orders.

"It brings people into the store, which is great since I'm on a block where 70 percent of the retail space is empty," said Waldeck, whose store was certified by the city as a green business because it uses compact fluorescent lightbulbs, low-flow toilets, nonpolluting cleaning supplies and recycled paper.

Lucas Heldfond is owner of Spring, the Polk Street home store that offers the \$150 mattress discount. He has sold two mattresses and a few gallons of paint through Green Zebra, and has also sold most of the 25 coupon books he stocked. "I didn't expect to sell any of the books or see too many coupons," Heldfond said. "It exceeds my expectations. People are very enthusiastic about it."

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